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REVOLUTIONARY
REPRISE of the
Blue Rose
Princess

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[1. The Prided Privy Council](#)

[2. Father and Son of House Sutherland](#)

[3. A Song of Prayer Sung in the Heart](#)

[4. And the Gears Begin to Turn](#)

[5. The Flower Blooming at the Ball](#)

[6. On That Night, We All Gather](#)

[7. Everyone's Aftermath](#)

[Side Story: A Faint Light and Doubt](#)

[Side Story: The Sutherland Name Lives On](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Other Series](#)

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1. The Prided Privy Council

AT the center of Heilland's politics is the Privy Council, the king's personal advisory body.

Due to the Two-Headed War, which arose from the succession struggle between two princes, Heilland was split into two camps for a long time. With no noble capable of coming between the two young and talented princes to mediate their conflict, the era of warfare dragged on and on.

Learning from history, the people quickly recognized the need for a governing body to support the monarch, as well as watch over the royal family and advise them against any missteps.

Thus, the Privy Council was formed.

Today, following an announcement from King James, the nobles of the Privy Council traveled from all corners of the kingdom again to gather at Egdiel Castle.

Heading the council was Nigel Otto, head of the advisory office. Members included the heads of various ministries serving the kingdom, such as District Commissioner Dan Dreyfus, as well as nobles of prestigious houses with titles of marquis or higher who governed the major territories of Heilland.

The carriage of one such noble, Loid Sutherland, the Duke of Sheraford, also arrived at Egdiel Castle. The black door of the carriage, fitted with gold metal decorations, opened, revealing a man with pure white hair and a hooked nose. The guard at the castle gates lowered his eyes involuntarily at the man's imposing presence.

Loid looked at the castle with eyes as cold as a snake as a young man stepped down from the carriage onto the ground behind him.

"Seriously. The Privy Council summoned on the whims of a ten-year-old child. Is there anything more foolish than this?" Riddhe Sutherland scoffed in a low

voice that only his father could hear as he looked at the other parked carriages.

“Keep your mouth shut, Riddhe.” In contrast to Riddhe’s anger, Loid’s voice remained cold and emotionless as he reprimanded his son. “You played a part in this as well. We would not be here if you’d succeeded in gaining the king’s trust instead of letting that boy with the tainted blood of Graham outsmart you.”

“...My apologies, Father,” Riddhe murmured obediently, though an inferno raged in his eyes as he glared at Egdiel Castle as if wishing to kill Clovis Cromwell with his gaze.

“Calm down,” his father advised. “It’s the Privy Council’s job to advise the royal family when they stray.”

Loid and his son approached the castle door as another carriage pulled in behind theirs. Following the red carpet laid out on the floor, the two climbed up the stairs.

“Her Highness the Princess needs to be taught to cooperate and listen to the right people,” the duke proclaimed, thumping his cane on the ground.



PRIVY Council meetings were held in a windowless room to prevent secrets regarding important decisions for the kingdom from leaking out. However, it only suffocated Alicia when she entered the room for the first time.

She sat at one end of a table arranged in a U-shape next to Nigel, who took his spot next to the king. On the opposite side of the U-shape sat Loid, the head of House Sutherland, and Riddhe next to him. King James presided at the front of the elongated room. The assembled nobles waited for King James to start the meeting. A chandelier sparkled above their heads, but the somber atmosphere made the room seem dark.

Despite that, King James’s eyes were bright as he addressed the council. “Prided Privy Council, my comrades who support our kingdom. First, I would like to express my deepest gratitude for you gathering here at my request.” Stopping to take a breath, the king then gestured towards Alicia. “As written in my decree, today’s agenda is to discuss the joint proposal submitted by the

advisory office and the district council in the name of my daughter, Alicia. Therefore, Alicia and her adviser, Clovis, will be joining us today.”

The nobles’ attention shifted to Alicia and Clovis. Feeling countless eyes on her, Alicia straightened her back and fought to present a calm front.

“The wide-area trading company proposed by them should bring prosperity to our people. Therefore, I would like everyone to support the establishment of the Mercurius Company,” King James continued with a reassuring smile. “Heiland is bigger than House Chester. It was built on the backs of its people, including everyone present here. That is why I wish for everyone to be sincere and honest today. That is all from me.”

With the conclusion of King James’s speech, Chief Adviser Otto explained the agenda to the Privy Council members again, diving into details such as the significance of establishing the Mercurius Company and the type of cooperation required from each lord.

While Nigel spoke, Alicia looked nervously at the faces of the gathered nobles as they listened quietly, hoping to catch every minute reaction to the proposal.

Alicia hoped to establish a wide-area trading company specializing in the circulation of goods and news, spanning freely across all territories of the noble houses, regardless of boundaries. Therefore, they would need written documents from each territory proving that the company was free to operate there.

Usually, companies would be taxed in exchange for permission from the lord to conduct business in their territory. However, since the Mercurius Company would be operating throughout all the territories, such a method couldn’t be employed without bankrupting the company.

Thus, the proposal required the lords to approve the company’s operations in their respective territories for a token fee. The company headquarters would be in the Marquisate of Rozen. The promise was that the local industries of each territory would then be able to expand their businesses on an unprecedented scale. The new company promised enormous financial gains in the long term. However, there might be pushback from smaller or private firms that didn’t want a large-scale company from another territory encroaching on their

business.

Surely some will oppose it, but who will be the first to voice it? Cold sweat dripped down Alicia's back, but the princess maintained her composure, watching the lords with intelligent eyes.

"...And that's the gist of the draft proposal to establish the Mercurius Company," Nigel concluded, pushing his silver-rimmed glasses up his nose. "Cooperation from every territory is needed to establish this company. That is why the king has summoned all the lords today, so everyone's voices will be heard."

Despite the many eyes on him, Nigel spoke firmly, showing his years of experience as an adviser to the king. Then his gaze swept over the lords, giving them silent permission to speak.

"I believe everyone has their own opinions about this matter. Those who agree with the proposal can voice their support, and those who are dissatisfied may share their reservations. I hope we can find an agreeable solution through discussion."

Some nobles murmured to each other. Finally, Daniel Bain, Marquis of Haber, seated quite a distance from Alicia, spoke first. "I support Her Highness's proposal."

A small commotion rippled through the space. Nigel remained calm as he turned to address Daniel. "Would you like to share your reason?"

"Because such a company will save us." The Marquis of Haber looked at the other nobles as if gauging their reaction before continuing. "To be frank, my territory is not that wealthy. We lack artisans, run only small local businesses, and are in a remote area. House Bain is doing all we can to keep the companies in our territory afloat, but there's only so much we can achieve on our own."

"In that case, I support the proposal as well." Mac Grant, Marquis of Morris, raised his hand. "If all the company earns is a measly token fee and some commission, I don't really care. They can spend all the money they want. As long as they get my territory's goods distributed and sold, that's good enough for me."

“I apologize for spoiling the fun, but I disagree,” Fudge Hobbs, Duke of Geras, interjected with a frown, looking at the two lords who had spoken as he stroked his trademark white beard. “The proposal has no benefit for those territories that are already wealthy. To have one’s territory invaded by a company from another while still having to fork out commissions? Unthinkable. How about letting the territories that need financial aid take part in this project while the others sit out?”

Hobbs’s comment proved to be the spark that ignited a heated discussion.

Everyone wanted to share their opinion, whether in support of or opposition to the proposal. At one point, the Minister of Finance reported on the incomes and expenditures of each territory for the past few years, blowing up the discussion even more.

It was too much for Alicia to follow.

Their opinions don’t match? She had come into the meeting assuming that the Privy Council would easily come together to support or reject the proposal. However, reality was never that simple. At that moment, she realized how divided the Privy Council was. Though united under the name of Heilland, they were a patchwork of rich and poor territories that were vastly different, even in the way they viewed issues.



IN contrast to the dumbfounded Alicia, Clovis watched the proceedings calmly.

He’d already predicted this outcome. The lords of the relatively poor territories would agree with the proposal, while the powerful ones would oppose it. What he hadn’t expected was how long the discussion would drag on.

I expected Lord Sutherland to immediately turn the flow of the discussion in his favor...

Loid Sutherland, the man capable of controlling the flow of conversation with a single word, remained silent as he sat opposite Clovis and Alicia, eyes closed and arms crossed. Clovis swallowed his unease. Of course, he did his best to

ignore Riddhe, whose glare was so sharp that Clovis could feel it slicing his skin.

Among the members of the Privy Council, House Sutherland was particularly prominent and powerful. But Loid had yet to say a word since the meeting began. Clovis had hoped to join the discussion after seeing what Loid had to say, though that would probably not happen now. Left without a choice, the adviser stood, ready to answer the lords' questions.

"I am Clovis Cromwell, Princess Alicia's adviser." Lowering his beautiful violet eyes, Clovis gave a respectful bow. He felt the cold gazes of the conservative nobles, Riddhe included, on his distinctive black hair.

In the past, he would have never dared to show himself before the nobles of the Privy Council due to being a descendant of Graham, afraid that his presence would be seen as a mockery of the kingdom. But he was different now.

He sensed the gaze of the girl beside him and the faith she had in him, and it gave him strength. He would do anything for her. That determination gave him the power to remain calm under the scrutiny of the nobles.



"NO matter what Her Highness says, I doubt that stubborn lot in the Privy Council will agree if we don't have a solid strategy." That was what Jude had said when Clovis traveled to the Marquisate of Rozen on a secret visit to discuss the issue. The young lord continued with a teasing smile. "So let me teach you the ultimate bargaining technique. It's a magical technique that draws out the answers you want, all while keeping your words free of lies."

There were to be two points to Clovis's argument. First, he had to convince the lords that the Mercurius Company was exactly what they needed. Second, Clovis had to insinuate that it would be too much trouble for the lords to oversee the company on their own.

"If you have a goal, you have to trick others into believing that achieving that goal is akin to winning the lottery. No worries, Clo, I'm sure you can do it."



"FIRST of all, I would like to address the point that the Mercurius Company holds no merit for the wealthier territories..."

Clovis knew that this point would be raised by the Privy Council and had prepared various counterarguments before the meeting with the other advisers. One argument was that, without the new company, Heilland's artisan industry would soon lose out to those in other countries. However, they still had to convince the council that this was a matter of grave concern.

The solution was unexpectedly close at hand, in the form of records Jude kept on trade ship cargo from the port town of Held.

"That's simple but brilliant! How did I not think of it before?!" Jude had exclaimed in excitement as he pulled out the records. "This should show the amount of goods being imported and exported from Held. By comparing the numbers, it's clear how our domestic goods are being pushed aside in favor of foreign products!"

With mounting glee, Jude had pointed out how several other countries, Erdal included, had shown significant increases in trade. Every single one had some version of a wide-area trading company in place, working to boost sales in local industries.

Presented with the records now, Hobbs grunted as he studied the trade fluctuations of Held. It was a simple yet vital piece of evidence that spelled potential doom for Heilland's local industries, despite everything seeming fine.

"This worrying trend is not limited to Held. Looking through past records submitted to the district council, something similar is happening at the land trading post of Viola," Clovis explained.

It was daring to drop the name of one of the towns in the Duchy of Sheraford into the discussion. However, aside from a twitch of the eyebrow, Loid Sutherland did not rise to the bait. In contrast, his son bared his teeth as he scowled in irritation.

The evidence presented by Clovis was changing the tide of opinion among the lords of the Privy Council. Those in opposition to the proposal shared intense gazes as if hoping for someone to come up with a valid argument. Time and again, someone would bring up a point, only for it to be struck down by objective numbers presented in evidence.

"Anyway, why must the company be based in the Marquisate of Rozen? I

know the headquarters must have a physical location, but does it have to be in the territory of that eccentric?”

Just as Clovis was about to speak, a rough voice called out in defense.

“Hey! Watch your mouth when you speak of Lord Jude Nicol!”

It was District Commissioner Dan Dreyfus. The other nobles stared with wide eyes, unable to believe the man famous for being at loggerheads with Jude was speaking up for him now.

Dan Dreyfus was built like a mountain bear, rough in appearance with a prominent beard. In reality, he was compassionate and fair and was thus highly regarded by the other council members. The influence he held was different from Loid Sutherland’s but no less powerful.

“What? Has something gotten into you? Why are you supporting Lord Rozen?”

“Yes, I hate him, but this proposal makes me see him in a different light.”

Clovis’s lips quirked up into a surprised smile, though Alicia was the only one to notice. The other people in the room focused on Dreyfus as he clenched a large fist and continued.

“His proposal is drafted to benefit every territory for a small commission. He has also promised me that the Marquisate of Rozen will cover the initial investment needed to establish the company! That is a manly and honorable offer!”

“And this is roughly the initial investment required to establish the company.” Clovis took the opportunity to casually drop the significant number into the conversation, causing the loudest uproar of the day among the lords.

“Well, if it really does cost that much...”

“Humph. That Lord Rozen prefers talking to merchants anyway, so he’s probably the best man to set up the company.”

Several lords wanted the potential money-making company to be in their own territory, but after hearing the initial investment needed, they backed out on their offers, flipping their opinions to push the responsibility onto the

Marquisate of Rozen.

Everything was falling into place for Clovis's team.

Alicia originally proposed for the initial investment to be split and paid for equally by the kingdom and the Marquisate of Rozen since the company was supposed to benefit the whole of Heilland. However, Jude declared that his marquisate would take on the financials alone.

"It's nothing. When there's an opportunity for profit, businessmen will sometimes take a bet and throw in money," Jude had said. "And if we let everyone know how much it'll cost the marquisate to set up the company, it'll lessen the feeling of unfairness when we collect commissions from them later. Plus, the high cost will shut down any offers to set up the company in their own territory instead of Rozen!"

Allowing another company to enter one's territory and then paying them a commission probably sounded foolish, but the advantages of a wide-area trading company couldn't be ignored. And since it sounded like such an expensive venture, it was easy to push it all on Jude Nicol.

Clovis knew that such a sentiment would spread quickly and be accepted by the nobles. They had been honest and had spread no lies. It was about how one cut the deck, guiding others toward the outcome in mind. While Jude wasn't the best at socializing with nobility, he was a true expert at bargaining.

But you won't let this conclude so easily. Returning Alicia's relieved smile, Clovis carefully glanced at Loid, who had still not spoken a word.



CLOVIS is amazing! To think that he can unify the divided Privy Council in our favor. Alicia watched the proceedings with great interest as she sat beside her adviser, who still seemed guarded.

Even as a ten-year-old girl, Alicia knew Loid's silence did not bode well. Clovis had also prepared her with a warning that the toughest task of the day was to convince the head of House Sutherland to support the proposal.

Loid suddenly raised his cane and struck it lightly on the floor. The crisp sound cut short the discussions among the other council members. "If I may speak..."

“Of course, Lord Sutherland.”

With Nigel’s permission, Loid stood without making a sound. He was not as tall as Clovis or even his son Riddhe, but the duke’s presence was still intimidating. Still silent, he cast his gaze across the other members of the Privy Council, and each shrank their heads down like frogs spotted by a snake. Then those sharp eagle eyes landed on Alicia.

“Your Highness. I have known since your infancy that you are a bright child, and that truly delights me.”

“...Thank you.”

Despite being suddenly addressed, Alicia did not flinch, gazing at Loid with clear, sky-blue eyes. The duke’s gaze remained sharp as he continued softly to praise the princess.

“You are extraordinary to have such foresight that sees far into a future beyond our imagination.”

“You flatter me,” Alicia murmured respectfully, shaking her head slowly, her beautiful, shining hair following her movements. “I am blessed to have capable subordinates and friends who understand my concerns and guide me in my actions.”

Her words stirred something in the duke’s sharp gaze. For the first time, Alicia felt her skin prickle.

“I see,” Loid answered before heaving a long sigh. “You are bright. You have great foresight. But that is why I am worried for you, Your Highness.”

The image of a snake with its long, red tongue flicking out as it zeroed in on its prey surfaced in Alicia’s mind. How she wanted to avert her gaze and hide behind her trusted adviser, but she tamped down that desire and focused on keeping the tremor out of her voice.

“Worried? Why would you feel so?”

Loid’s smile was freezing cold. “I am worried that a scoundrel will take advantage of Your Highness’s good heart and use your name to bring chaos into politics.”

A commotion rippled through the room as the other nobles murmured to each other. Just as Alicia grasped the true intention of Loid's words, Nigel silently stood from his seat.

"I cannot take that lying down," he stated as he stood opposite Loid, pushing his silver-rimmed glasses up. The chief adviser's tone was calm, but it was clear that a fire was raging within him. "Don't you feel that your remarks are an insult to the advisory office and the district council, who jointly put together this proposal?"

"Huh?! What?! You have a problem with the district council, Loid?!" Dan Dreyfus barked as he stood as if he, too, had just understood the meaning of Loid's words.

However, Loid just snorted lightly. "Oh, do not jump to conclusions. It is a gut feeling since the Privy Council is dealing with unfamiliar people about a new matter. What do they say? That unfamiliarity breeds unease?"

A chill ran down Alicia's back. It was an attack aimed at Clovis and Jude, who seldom had the chance to deal with the Privy Council.

"Take that back!" Before she knew it, Alicia was glaring at Loid. "They are worthy of our trust. If you think they are stringing me along for their own schemes, then you are gravely mistaken. Do you even know how much they have done for our kingdom...?!"

"Of course, of course, Your Highness," Loid murmured as he came to stand before Alicia, looking down at her. He was smiling softly, but the emotion did not reach his eyes. "I was just voicing the worry that some of us may be feeling. After all, the Mercurius Company you are campaigning for bears a striking resemblance to the Ist Trading Company belonging to our neighbor."

Loid then pointed to Clovis.

"Plus, Lord Cromwell was the main author of this proposal. He may be a talented man, but I also know that he was part of the inspection squad sent to Erdal and how he was deeply impressed by the political system there."

Alicia slowly realized Loid's intention, and unfortunately, her bad premonition was spot on.

“A revolution to abolish the noble houses that make up Heilland to create an empire like the one our neighboring empress is ruling over... Does he hold such ideals in his heart? That is why some of us are worried.”

The hall exploded with voices.

“Oi, oi, isn’t that too much of a conspiracy?” Dreyfus’s voice boomed, but even that was swallowed up in the din.

The same sense of unease ran through Clovis and Nigel’s minds. Loid’s words had gone overboard. Alicia was young, but she was still royalty. Besides, her father, King James, was also present.

Insulting Clovis, the princess’s adviser, was akin to insulting his mistress, the princess, a move that could incur the displeasure of the king. No matter how much he opposed the proposal for the new company, it was foolish and irrational to speak against Clovis in that manner.

As the minds of both advisers raced to understand the situation, the clamor died down instantly. King James had silently raised his right hand. At his gesture, the nobles of the Privy Council, even Loid, who had dominated the space, shut their mouths and bowed their heads in respect.

“Loid.” King James’s voice was calm and quiet as he looked at his subject with almond-colored eyes, but it resonated throughout the room. “I am not impressed. A man of your status should not incite unnecessary anxiety based on pure speculation. That is an act meant to sow discord.”

The king’s tone remained level, but his words were harsh. Loid remained collected and dignified, but Riddhe’s eyes darted about the room with fear.

“I allowed this man here because Cia trusts him,” King James continued. “If you have doubts about Clovis, does that mean you have doubts about me or the Crown?”

“I deeply apologize for incurring your displeasure, Your Majesty. My sole intention is to uphold the harmony of our kingdom.” Loid placed a hand on his chest and gave a theatrical, deep bow. It was clear from whom Riddhe had learned his mannerisms. Then Lord Sutherland’s face turned serious as he appealed to the king. “What I meant was that small doubts can sometimes

arouse great fears. Even if we make a decision today, the doubt in some of our hearts will fester and grow, tearing the unified heart of the Privy Council apart.”

“But you were the one who planted those seeds of doubt,” Nigel muttered quietly.

“Therefore, I would like to suggest that we do not make a decision today and that the Privy Council take the proposal in for now. Once a number of us have looked through it, we can clear any unfounded suspicions and leave no room for doubt or regret.”

“Hmm...”

He didn’t want to reject the proposal outright but to delay its approval. King James rested his kindly round face on his hand as he pondered Loid’s words.

His words are like poison, Alicia thought.

They had done everything to guide the Privy Council towards rational judgment and gain their approval, relying on objective data and numbers they had gathered and “selling points” carefully prepared by Jude.

But now, no thanks to Loid’s skillful storytelling, the nobles were entirely focused on something else. In other words, a vague fear that Alicia and her subjects could one day threaten their power in the Privy Council possessed them.

“Well, I guess there is no need to rush to a conclusion.”

Alicia didn’t know who spoke up first, but the others quickly followed.

“Lord Dreyfus and Lord Otto looked through the proposal, but the authors are still novices who’ve never been involved in national affairs until now.”

“The Privy Council should inspect the proposal once again to make sure everything is in order.”

“Agreed, we can always make a decision later. I mean, it is such an important matter that concerns our kingdom’s future.”

“Your Majesty, please allow the Privy Council to examine the proposal.”

“Your Majesty.”

It can't be...

Alicia stared dumbfoundedly as the lords begged the king to postpone the decision, not noticing the way Riddhe smirked meanly at her predicament. And she was not the only one frustrated.

District Commissioner Dreyfus was also upset, sitting with his arms crossed and an unamused look on his face. "Postpone the decision and reexamine the proposal? Well, if that's what everyone wants, then I guess we have no choice," he muttered.

"It's not going to be as simple as that," Chief Adviser Nigel Otto murmured back bitterly, his blue eyes brimming with anger behind his glasses. "Everyone has lost sight of the original purpose of this meeting, their minds clouded by baseless suspicions. When those involved in national politics are so easily swayed by rumors, can they really make the best decisions for the people?"

Despite Nigel's frustration, a consensus had been reached. Except for a few, the majority voted for the draft proposal to establish the Mercurius Company to be temporarily entrusted to the Privy Council.

It was thus decided that the Privy Council would gather to examine the proposal with King James's permission, then make their final decision.



THE lords left the room one after another. The Privy Council was scheduled to meet again in a week, so most of the lords would stay in their mansions within the capital.

Princess Alicia's expression was clouded as she remained seated in dejection. The meeting had ended a while ago, but she couldn't find the energy to move. Unable to bear the sight any longer, Clovis waited for the last noble to exit before standing before Alicia and bowing deeply.

"I am truly sorry, Your Highness."

"Huh...?"

The ten-year-old girl didn't understand why her adviser was apologizing. She looked at him, shocked, as Clovis stood back up, a look of regret on his

handsome face.

“I was not good enough, and now the decision has been delayed. We managed to turn the tide of opinion so well, but...!”

“It’s okay, Clovis.”

Standing up quickly, Alicia grabbed her adviser’s hand. He seemed shocked as her small hand wrapped around his, her face full of gratitude as she gazed at him.

“You did so well. I thought it would be hard, but you convinced them really well.”

“But...”

“I’m the one who wasn’t good enough,” Alicia confessed weakly, lowering her bright sky-blue gaze.

“I am blessed to have capable subordinates and friends who understand my concerns and guide me in my actions.”

Those were her words to Loid. While they stemmed from Alicia’s pure heart, the duke turned them against her and derailed their plan. It had lent weight to the false impression that Clovis Cromwell and Jude Nicol were using the princess to manipulate national politics.

Alicia had never been more ashamed of her own lack of power and wisdom. If she had been an experienced lady instead of a girl, others would not see Clovis in such a dishonorable way, as an adviser manipulating an ignorant princess. If she’d been a little wiser, she might have guessed what Loid was trying to make her say, taken charge of the situation, and come up with a plan to discredit him altogether.

“You worked so hard for me, but I was powerless and ruined everything. I’m so sorry!”

“Your Highness...” Clovis shook his head, a dismayed expression on his face. He had not come here today to make his beloved princess feel this way. “Please stop. When you look at me like that, I—”

“Give up, princess. If there’s anything to worry about, it’s who you should

choose as a partner. That's all I have to say."

The princess and adviser whipped their heads around, identifying the intruder who stood by the door. Indeed, there Riddhe Sutherland was, twirling his red hair around a finger.

"I apologize for my late greeting, Your Highness, but I'm in such a good mood."

Now that he had their attention, Riddhe greeted Alicia respectfully with a theatrical bow, just like his father's. Clovis's shapely brow twitched at the sight.

"It may be too late to ask, but why are you present today? You are not part of the Privy Council, are you?"

"Shut up! I'll be a member soon, so I have every right to attend! You're the one who has no right to be here!"

Clovis's question put him in a bad mood. As the next head of House Sutherland, he had been given special permission to attend the Privy Council meeting to learn the ropes. Then, as if ashamed of his outburst, Riddhe cleared his throat to start over, giving a mischievous shrug.

"So, dear Princess Alicia, I hope today's incident has given you a good idea of who your real allies are."

"If there is something you wish to say, speak it clearly," Alicia responded with a glare.

However, Riddhe just sauntered joyfully into the hall, his steps light as if he would break into dance at any moment. Moving to stand before Alicia, he snorted at Clovis before crouching down and offering a hand to the princess.

"Please feel free to take my hand," he exclaimed as Alicia frowned in confusion.

"What is the meaning of this?" the black-haired adviser asked. Riddhe's lips quirked up into a smirk.

"Haven't you learned, Cromwell? No matter how talented a man is, he is powerless if he doesn't have friends in the Privy Council. And with the blood of Graham coursing through your veins, you'll never gain the trust of anyone.

What a shame!” he teased in a gleeful voice before turning to address Alicia again. “I will inherit the duchy one day, and I, unlike him, can be the bridge between you and the Privy Council, including my father. So, choose me—choose the Sutherlands—as your ally. Make your choice and listen to the right people. As long as you choose rightly, you’ll never make a blunder like this again.”

At any other time, Alicia would have resolutely rejected Riddhe’s nonsensical offer. However, she had lost all confidence in herself. Overcome with an overwhelming sense of helplessness, she wondered if anything she said ever mattered. She had always been aware of her lack of power, but confronted with a defeat like this, she realized her dreams of changing the future might really be nothing more than dreams.

In her ideal world, the royal family and citizens could share their wisdom and stand together as one kingdom. However, the current Privy Council made that a pipe dream.

Even the nobles were divided into conservative and moderate camps depending on the territories they governed, separated by a deep chasm. To make matters worse, a dark and murky sense of suspicion lurked beneath the surface, rearing its head anytime a dispute happened.

She would never be able to rally and guide them toward her ideals. Nor could she ever become their ruler.

“Please leave.”

A harsh voice jerked Alicia out of her thoughts. She lifted her face in shock just in time to see Clovis slap Riddhe’s hand away.

Riddhe was shocked, too, as he stared at the hand Clovis had slapped away. Then his burning gaze turned towards Alicia’s adviser. “Damn you...! Who do you think you’re talking to?!”

“I should be asking you. How long do you plan to mock my mistress?”

Before her wide eyes, Clovis’s stunningly handsome face quietly filled with fury. Those violet eyes beneath his dark hair were so piercing that even Riddhe hesitated for an instant.

“Her Highness decides what she wants to do on her own. As her adviser, I can only provide guidance... If you cannot even understand that, then you have no place beside her.”

“What?!”

Riddhe’s bared his teeth as he gritted them hard, but Clovis spared him only a cold glance before giving the nervous Alicia a gentle nudge on the back.

“Let us return to your chambers, Your Highness. There is no need for us to linger any longer.”

“Wait!! Cromwell!!”

Riddhe’s fierce voice followed the two as they turned to leave. Sneaking a backward glance as Clovis ushered her away, Alicia saw the young lord huffing with rage. Strangely, she thought she spotted something like envy in his gaze, mixed in with contempt and anger.

“That’s what I hate most about you,” Riddhe yelled in a voice that seemed to crawl over Alicia’s skin. Then he suddenly barked out a laugh. “So what now? You’re trying to play the hero? You think you’re always right, but don’t go thinking this will last forever. The Privy Council and my father will never listen to you!”

“...Politics is never about winning.”

“Clovis?”

From her position, Clovis’s eyes remained shadowed by his hair, so she couldn’t gauge his expression. However, that low but resounding voice held a quiet note of disappointment.

“I have a question for you,” he said, addressing Riddhe. “When Lord Nigel introduced the Mercurius Company, you pretended to look bored, but you were listening intently. Do you agree that the new company we are proposing will benefit Heilland?”

“Well...” Riddhe suddenly hesitated.

“You were not the only one. Aside from those who were vocally for or against the proposal, the rest of the nobles were starting to grasp the significance of

the new company. Until your father's interruption... Do you not find it strange? He might have wanted to regain control over the Privy Council, but don't you find his method slightly heavy-handed?"

Riddhe's eyes wavered before he caught himself and clucked his tongue in annoyance, but it was enough to show that even the young lord had been doubtful of his father's actions.

"Do not get caught up in trying to win, and focus on what matters... I pray that you will open your eyes soon and become Her Highness's true ally one day." With these words, Clovis turned his back on Riddhe.



"CLOVIS...? Erm..."

They were on their way back to Alicia's chambers after taking leave of Riddhe Sutherland. Her adviser seemed different from his usual self, which confused Alicia. However, his hand on her shoulder remained gentle. In that aspect, at least, he was still himself.

But Clovis had never hurried the way he was doing now. Alicia had always been the one leading him around the castle, and her adviser would follow behind respectfully.

...He's really acting so strange.

The princess let her mind wander. Her adviser was the one who led her out into a new world when she had been too afraid to visit the castle town. He also guided her to visit the Marquisate of Rozen when she couldn't think of how to achieve her goal.

That was it. Clovis had always supported her and led her by the hand.

A stinging sensation shot up her nose, and she felt like crying. Her adviser was so devoted to her, but she'd been nothing but a burden.

"Welcome back! Wh-What's the matter, Your Highness?!"

Clovis had pushed open the door to her chambers just as Alicia was holding back tears. Inside, her two maids had been waiting with smiles, but they quickly sensed the anxiety in their mistress.

“Who was the one who dared to bully our princess?! Oh, it must be those discourteous men in the Privy Council!”

“Lord Clovis! What happened to Her Highness?”

Annie and Martha were fidgeting with worry as they stood behind Clovis, but Alicia was too busy fighting back tears to even smile at them to ease their concern.

Finally, Clovis’s beautiful violet gaze turned to Alicia. “We are back, Your Highness.”

The soothing voice from above warmed up Alicia’s frozen heart as she sniffled and squeezed her eyes shut, willing her tears not to fall.

She couldn’t rely on him again.

She had to become stronger.

Her eyes still closed, Alicia heard Clovis let out a soft sigh.

“Over here, Your Highness.”

A warm hand touched her back and guided her to sit on the sofa. Then Clovis sat next to her—something unusual since his usual spot was across from her.

Then...

“Oh!”

“Huh?”

...*What?*

Before she knew it, warmth enveloped Alicia’s body. Her soft cheek was pressed gently against the silky fabric as a hand wrapped around her neck and head. Belatedly, she realized that Clovis was hugging her.

Um, what... What is going on?

She was so surprised that the tears in her eyes dried up. Caught in her adviser’s hug, Alicia could only sit silently, eyes wide.

“Please forgive me, Your Highness.”

That low and clear voice that Alicia loved sounded closer than she’d ever

heard it. She didn't know if Clovis was apologizing for their failure in the meeting today or for daring to hug the princess.

"Clovis...?"

Her heart raced, and her cheeks grew hot. It confused Alicia more. She'd never felt such restlessness or comfort from a hug before.

Clovis let out a wry smile, unaware of the turmoil in his mistress's mind.

"I still have so much to learn."

"Huh?"

"Your Highness is so strong-willed that I sometimes forget that you are just a young girl, almost ten years my junior."

Clovis's hand stroked lightly along the back of Alicia's head as if soothing a small child. Just then, a thought occurred to her.

"When I was small, Mother always gave me a hug when I cried."

Clovis had remembered what she'd told him during their trip to town. The tears she'd held back welled up again at the realization.

She must be strong. But Alicia's stubborn heart was melted by a pleasant warmth.

"...I couldn't do anything." Alicia swallowed painfully as she recalled the fear she'd felt when Loid stared at her. "Standing before the Privy Council was so frightening that my legs were trembling, but I didn't want to lose and wanted to live up to your expectations since you supported me, but..."

"Please never belittle yourself this way."

The arm around Alicia tightened slightly, and Alicia let the tears fall, large drops blurring her vision and falling onto her adviser's fine clothes. The princess shivered as she remembered the terror she felt earlier. She tried to twist away, but Clovis's hand held her steady.

"I was able to stand firm because of your faith in me," Clovis said. "Can you imagine how I was so nervous about facing the Privy Council that I could not sleep last night?"

“Really?” Alicia lifted her head in surprise at her adviser’s confession. So close, Clovis’s face was breathtakingly handsome, even with his brow furrowed in embarrassment and a wry smile on his lips.

“It is embarrassing... And when we reached the room, I saw Riddhe Sutherland there. I just cannot get along with him.” Clovis let out a quiet sigh as he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Alicia saw herself reflected warmly in his steady violet gaze. “However, your efforts gave me strength. I can face anything for your sake... So please, do not blame yourself or think you are powerless. You have done so well.”

His gentle words broke Alicia. Tears fell again from her clear, sky-blue eyes, dripping onto her adviser’s chest as he held her quietly.

For a while, the princess clung to her adviser, her shoulders shaking as she sobbed. Clovis remained quiet as he stroked her back. Finally, Alicia fell into an exhausted sleep in his embrace.



GUESS she really is tired.

Clovis smiled softly as his mistress lay sleeping peacefully in his arms. She always had such a mature, intelligent look about her, but her sleeping face showed who she really was: a young girl.



Her eyes were slightly red from all the crying, and the sight made his chest ache.

How cruel was he?

She was the descendant of House Chester and the only daughter of the king. She should be happy, loved by all for her bright and lovely personality, and not subjected to such pain.

If she wanted to avoid a war with Erdal, all she had to do was surround herself with trusted subjects and keep an eye on developments (disregarding how effective that would actually be). If she wanted to give her kingdom a better future, she could always look for a man who could achieve that goal and become her future husband.

But Clovis did not want to see that. He wanted to see this smart girl change the kingdom's future on her own, for Princess Alicia to become the savior of Heilland.

Alicia's ultimate goal was to learn from her previous life's mistakes and give her all for Heilland's future. That was why Clovis could not lead his mistress away from this thorny path, no matter how much it hurt her.

But I can stay by your side and support you to ease your pain.

Feeling her solid warmth in his arms, Clovis closed his eyes.

There were so many things to do.

Today's meeting had shown them who the conservative and moderate nobles were. They had to ask Commissioner Dreyfus and Chief Adviser Otto for their support before next week's meeting.

There were also the marquises Daniel Bain and Mac Grant, who had clearly shown their support for the proposal. There might be more lords willing to ally with them. They had to reach out to those nobles before they decided to join the opposition camp.

Then... Here, Clovis's thoughts slowed as he recalled Loid Sutherland's piercing gaze.

The duke's choice of denouncing the king's beloved daughter in front of

everyone to postpone the decision was risky, even if he wanted to show the power he wielded in the Privy Council. It would be wise to find out if there was another reason behind his actions...

“Lord Clovis~?!”

An imposing presence approaching from behind brought Clovis, lost in thought as he stroked his mistress’s soft sky-blue hair, back to reality.

“Do you need something?” he asked, turning back with a smile.

“Need something? Of course not!” Annie groaned loudly with a hand clutching her head.

“Please be quiet. Do you want to wake Her Highness?” Clovis murmured, raising a finger to his lips. Annie immediately lowered her volume but continued glaring at him in frustration.

“H-How can you hold her like this so comfortably?!!”

“Holding Her Highness...? I’m jealous...” Martha chimed in quietly as well, looking resentfully at Clovis.

“I just wanted to soothe Her Highness’s heart. She has been strong for so long.”

“Oh!! I know you have no ulterior motives, Lord Clovis! But that just makes me all the more frustrated!”

“Holding Her Highness... I want to hold Her Highness too...”

Clovis couldn’t help but chuckle at the two maids as they complained as quietly as they could. Before anything else, he’d have to appease these maids, who adored their mistress so much.



ALICIA took the rest of the day off to rest and recover. However, she jumped into action the next day.

Thanks to Clovis’s help in coordinating the district council and advisory office, Alicia contacted the noble lords in the Privy Council who might be on her side. One of them was Daniel Bain, Marquis of Haber, who had expressed his support

during the meeting.

Since the council would be meeting again in a week, Alicia learned that the lords would be staying in their respective mansions surrounding the capital instead of returning to their territories. As such, she could easily write letters and have them delivered to the lords.

Of course, it would be too much to expect full support, but overall, Alicia received favorable responses from most of the lords she'd written to. She had made sure to write each letter in her own hand, reassuring them of her respect.

Some lords who received the letter responded with an invitation for Alicia and her adviser to pay them a visit at their mansion to talk things through directly. Furthermore, the Marquises of Haber and Morris promised to support Alicia during the next meeting.

Progress was slow but steady. Reminding herself of that, Alicia and her adviser touched base with as many nobles as they could.



“WE got another rejection letter.”

“Indeed.”

Clovis bowed his head respectfully as Alicia read through the letter.

The Privy Council was scheduled to meet again the day after tomorrow.

The nobles from the moderate camp were also sending in their responses to the princess, confirming whether they would support the proposal or not.

This rejection letter was the third one they'd received this morning. Together with the two supportive responses they also received, the numbers stood roughly at around 50/50. Despite that, some of the lords they had high hopes for refused to promise their support, making things a little tougher to swallow.

Alicia sorted the letters into two piles based on their responses. Then, she did a mental calculation to add up the total number of responses they'd received.

...It was dire. House Sutherland really did have absolute influence over the others.

“I must be patient,” she said. “Much like what we’re doing, the opposition must also be contacting the nobles to bring them over to their camp.”

“Your Highness may be royalty, but some noble houses would not wish to slight the Sutherlands and have thus made the decision in their favor... By the way, Jude has sent us a slightly concerning report.”

Clovis passed a document to Alicia. The princess’s intelligent eyes widened as she read through Jude’s beautiful, flowing script.

“The merchants he’s called upon for cooperation are turning him down one after another...? Haven’t the responses thus far been favorable?”

Jude’s letter claimed that it was getting tougher to recruit merchants to do business with the new company. Jude had only wanted to work with people he trusted, so they had decided to entrust the selection of people in charge of the new Mercurius Company to him. Thus, he had been using his own personal connections to reach out to influential merchants in hopes that they could start work as soon as they received the Privy Council’s approval.

Thus far, many of the merchants he approached had been willing to work with the Mercurius Company as founding members. That had been expected since everyone knew of Heilland’s excellent artisanal industry, and the wide-area trading company had promised them huge profits.

However, according to Jude’s letter, the merchants’ reactions suddenly turned unfavorable. It was a recent change that started to happen just a day after the Privy Council’s first meeting.

“What does this mean? Has the opposition camp been in contact with the merchants, too?”

“There’s a good chance, but we cannot be certain.”

“Are any family members of the Privy Council lords visiting the Marquisate of Rozen this week?”

Clovis shook his head at Alicia’s question. “I checked in with the Northern Knight Division as soon as I received Jude’s news, but that’s not the case. Most of Sutherland’s relatives are commoners, with a few knights as well. I cannot say for certain who is in contact with the duke.”

It was the Sutherlands again. The Duke of Sheraford's terrifying and imposing stare filled Alicia's mind. He had been so insistent on postponing the decision, but what if his true motive was to reject the proposal? He was a resourceful man. He could have pressured the merchants Jude had reached out to and convinced them not to work with the new company.

"But whoever is persuading the merchants seems to be doing too good a job. Neither the duke nor Riddhe has left Egdiel. What in the world is happening...?"

Clovis's shapely brows furrowed as he pondered with Alicia.

The biggest problem was that the district council was again reviewing the feasibility of setting up the company. Being rejected by merchant after prominent merchant was not going to look good for them.

And if Loid was the mastermind behind this, he would surely use this fact to denounce the company, claiming that it was running aground before it even started...

A knock sounded from behind Clovis. Alicia gave Annie a signal, and the maid opened the door, revealing Robert von Belt, vice-captain of the knights of the Imperial Guard.

The silver-haired knight brought news of a visitor. Recently, Alicia had been traveling out to meet with various nobles regarding the company, so this was the first time someone had called upon her. Robert shook his head at the princess's surprised expression.

"There's no need to see him if you don't wish to. Personally, I think you should refuse. Also, he has requested your presence, Clovis."

Alicia and Clovis looked at each other in shock as Robert announced the visitor's name.

2. Father and Son of House Sutherland

...A few days ago.

“Dammit!!”

A large door slammed open with a loud bang. The servants of House Sutherland hurried out from the back of the manor at the commotion, only to spot Riddhe, the young master of the house, looking furious. They were in the Sutherland Mansion in the royal capital, where the family usually stayed when they had urgent business in the city, such as Privy Council meetings.

The servants here were the best of the household, handpicked from those working in the duke’s family mansion back in Sheraford in anticipation of a drawn-out stay should the council meeting take up more days than expected. Even so, none of them were brave enough to engage Riddhe right now. After some exchanges of glances, a young man finally stepped forward.

“Welcome back, young master. Is something the matter?”

“Dammit!! Everything is the matter!!”

The young servant who spoke was Albert. His father was a butler in service to House Sutherland for many years, so Albert had been a regular part of the household since childhood, becoming one of the rare few close to Riddhe.

Pushing his coat and cane into Albert’s arms, Riddhe stormed up the stairs, indignant, complaining as his servant hurried after him.

“Listen to this nonsense, Al!! Apparently, Princess Alicia is attempting to contact the other Privy Council members. I saw the royal carriage parked in front of the Ridley Mansion!”

“I see.”

With the force of a tornado, Riddhe thundered into his room and flung himself into a chair. Undoing the top two buttons on his shirt, he frowned and

ran a hand through his hair.

Princess Alicia Chester. She was always so well-mannered, but even she had been slightly stiff and guarded under the scrutiny of the assembled lords of the Privy Council. Especially when his father denounced her, she paled considerably, even though she never broke eye contact.

He had believed her vulnerable, which was why he'd approached her after the meeting. However, that damned Cromwell came in between them again. And now, here he was.

"AARRGH! He pisses me off!!" Riddhe shouted, clutching at his head. "Why are we being treated as villains when our house is the one that has served and supported the Crown through the generations?!"

"Calm down, Master Riddhe. We don't want your precious hair to get damaged."

Recalling how Clovis slapped his hand away rekindled Riddhe's rage. Albert, however, was used to his outbursts. As Riddhe's most favored servant, he'd witnessed a fair share of his master's tantrums.

"Let me get the maids to prepare some tea, so please rest," he answered with a smile and made to leave the room. However, Riddhe suddenly called out to him.

"By the way, is there a visitor with Father now?"

Right before he stormed into the mansion, Riddhe spotted a single carriage parked in a secluded spot on the grounds as if trying to stay hidden. He had seen that carriage before, with its particular design. However, he'd never seen the owner since they always seemed to arrive when Riddhe was out and left before he returned.

"Father and I are extremely busy with that proposal business right now. Who's so thoughtless and daring as to disturb us at such a time?"

In fact, Riddhe had just returned from visiting some lords on the Privy Council who were still on the fence, hoping to sway them against joining the camp supporting the proposal. That said, Daniel Bain, Marquis of Haber, hadn't spared him a glance the whole time, souring Riddhe's mood even further. As

such, Riddhe hadn't really been interested in hearing the answer to his casual question but his servant, who had been on his way out, stiffened and stopped walking.

...Hmm?

That aroused Riddhe's suspicions about his father's mysterious visitor. As the duke, Loid constantly had to meet with people, so this shouldn't have been anything out of the ordinary. Was it really a coincidence that this particular guest always dropped by only when Riddhe was out?

"Hey, Al. Do you know who Father's visitor is?"

Despite tending to Riddhe most of the time, Albert could have seen the mysterious visitor before, but the young servant turned back with a shake of the head and a troubled smile.

"I have no knowledge of the master's official affairs, but if it is truly someone important, I am sure he will introduce him to you in time?"

"That's true."

Albert's face relaxed as he let out a quiet breath and left the room with a bow, failing to notice the look of doubt on Riddhe's face.



ALBERT was hiding something from him.

Certain of that fact, Riddhe waited until the servant had left the room before quietly getting up and following the man.

Albert had grown to know his young master well after spending so much time together, but the same could be said of Riddhe. Despite his arrogance often getting in the way of his ability to read the room, Riddhe was, at heart, still an empathetic person.

To think I have to sneak around like this in my own mansion... Riddhe sighed internally as he hid behind pillars and walls, hoping Albert wouldn't notice him.

As the heir to the duchy, he had to know what kind of connections his father had. Despite repeating this to himself, Riddhe felt a tinge of guilt. His strict father had raised him to be bold at all times. And, though he didn't realize it

himself, the doubt he'd felt deep down in his heart during the Privy Council meeting also fueled him.

His father usually placed great importance on the correct order of things, but that day, he had spoken out against the royal family, voicing the vague anxieties in everyone's hearts and leading the discussion into chaos.

Even if he'd wanted to put that damned Cromwell and the advisory office in their places, did it really warrant such a risky move...?

But Riddhe respected his father. He wouldn't question the man. While he pushed those doubts aside, he couldn't hide his curiosity about the mysterious visitor.

The shame he felt reminded him of the two years he spent in Erdal as part of the inspection squad.



"I will become a great man worthy of the Sutherland name, just like Father!"

A young Riddhe often said this.

He had been surrounded by everything he needed from the moment he was born: a prestigious lineage of ancestors who served the Crown since Heilland's founding, a great father with unshakeable influence over the Privy Council, and a mother who poured all her love and expectations into him. Plus, the countless people who showered praise upon him, hoping to share in the light of his glory.

Riddhe believed wholeheartedly that he was the chosen one.

And, as heir to the glory of House Sutherland, which made him superior to others, he decided he had to hold on to this superiority in everything he did from then on.

Truth be told, Riddhe met all expectations put on him as the heir to the duchy.

His father was a dignified lord respected by those around him, and Riddhe deeply respected and strongly admired the man since childhood. Dreaming of inheriting House Sutherland from his father one day, the boy had been passionate and hardworking in his studies.

Unfortunately, the adults around him often showered him with excessive praise because of his status, resulting in Riddhe's arrogant personality and belief that he was the chosen one. In any case, as Riddhe grew up, he slowly lost sight of the important traits of being a person, such as thoughtfulness, humility, and compassion for others.

Nonetheless, he was perfectly capable of succeeding the duchy, and many associated with House Sutherland looked forward to that day. Riddhe was aware of this, and it fueled his high spirits when it was decided that he would join the inspection squad.

That was before Clovis appeared before him.

A person Riddhe just couldn't stand.

He couldn't stand to see someone with a sinner's blood receive such an honorable offer from the king. Couldn't stand how his handsome appearance garnered him the fervent attention of the young ladies of Erdal. But what Riddhe couldn't stand the most was how intelligent Clovis was, earning him the respect of the whole squad.

For Riddhe, the name of House Sutherland was absolute, second to none but the king. And as the heir to the family, he had to be superior to everyone else. He had panicked. To prove his superiority, he competed with Clovis at every turn. However, no matter what Riddhe said, everyone heeded Clovis's words.

It was a heavy blow to Riddhe's inflated ego, smothering him with a terrible sense of insecurity.

As long as Clovis Cromwell was around, Riddhe would be in his shadow. Not only would this disappoint his respected father, but it would also sully the glory of House Sutherland. As the heir to such a great house, he couldn't lose to anyone.

And that was the reason he was always so hostile towards Clovis.

Of course, knowing none of this, Clovis only saw Riddhe as an annoyance.

But for Riddhe, it was a matter of life and death.



ARGH, damn it! All these hateful memories are coming back to haunt me!

Riddhe frowned and gritted his teeth, still hidden behind a pillar, as Albert knocked on the door of his father's study. Before Riddhe could stomp his foot in frustration, the door opened, bringing him back to the current situation. Loid had opened the door himself, and seeing Albert, he spoke.

"Has Riddhe returned?"

"Yes, he is resting in his room now."

Loid nodded as someone called out from behind the door.

"Well then, Your Grace. Let us conclude for today."

Riddhe stiffened at the unfamiliar voice. It was surprising his usually cautious father had received the guest in his study rather than the mansion's reception room. Besides, that man's tone had a slight accent. Riddhe frowned. He'd heard that accent before. Had been used to hearing it for quite a while now.

Is that man an Erdalian...?

Why would an Erdalian come to speak to his father during such an important time? Riddhe's heart raced as questions filled his mind.

Of course, it was common for Erdalian merchants to visit the Sutherland Mansion. After all, the town of Viola was a land trading post that did business with their neighbors, Erdal included, so it made sense that merchants from various countries would visit the duke.

However, he had never seen his father interact with merchants unless absolutely necessary. Besides, there shouldn't be any Erdalian so close to his father to be invited into the lord's personal study.

Riddhe shook his head, trying to dislodge his thoughts before they suggested something terrible.

Loid valued tradition and order, always attentive during Privy Council meetings to ensure the kingdom stayed on the right path. Riddhe admired him greatly, and when he inherited the duchy, he would follow in his esteemed father's footsteps and bring peace and order to the kingdom.

So, there must be a good reason why his father was dealing with Erdalians,

and Riddhe had no reason to worry. As Riddhe tried to convince himself, the Erdalian and Loid continued their conversation.

“I am relieved to hear your firm resolve in this, Your Grace. My master will be pleased.”

“Tell your master that we Sutherlands never break a promise. I will bury the idea of the wide-area trading company with my own hands, so remind your master of their promise as well.” Loid’s sharp eyes flashed as he spoke, but the other man only laughed. His next words ground Riddhe’s world to a halt.

“Do not worry. My master always keeps their word. When His Highness Fritz begins his reign, he will welcome the Privy Council like old friends.”



“**EXCUSE** me, young master. I heard from the maids that you are looking for me?”

Albert’s smile was cheerful as always as he entered the room, but Riddhe’s expression remained dark as he looked at his servant, who stood respectfully by the door.

The clever Albert realized that the duke’s son was upset. Riddhe often wore his heart on his sleeve, and a single look at his face betrayed his emotions, whether it be anger, frustration, or joy.

Riddhe’s expression seemed conflicted as he lay back on the sofa, arms flung over the backrest as if exhausted. But what surprised Albert the most was the sense of deep hurt emanating from the usually confident man.

“Is something the matter, Riddhe?! Are you feeling unwell?”

Seeing the troubled Riddhe, Albert dropped the formalities as he worriedly rushed towards the sofa. Riddhe looked at him with dark and gloomy eyes.

“You knew who that man was.”

“Huh...?”

For a moment, Albert was at a loss. Before he knew it, Riddhe’s face contorted with rage as he stood forcefully from the sofa and grabbed the panicked servant by the collar.

“Answer me, Al! I know you lied. We’ve spent so many years growing up together, I can tell!”

The color drained from Albert’s face at Riddhe’s rough tone. Instantly, he knew the young man had followed him to Loid’s study.

“So answer me,” Riddhe continued his tirade. “Who is that Erdalian man who came to see Father? And Father...!! He—”

“Let him go, son. I was the one who ordered him not to say anything.”

At the sound of that low but resonant voice, Riddhe reflexively let go of Albert. Not out of obedience, but because the voice belonged to the man he least wanted to see.

“Father...”

Only now did the pair notice Loid standing at the open door. In contrast to his upset son, Loid watched Riddhe with calm eyes.

“So, you were the one who was watching us. You messed up, Albert. I trusted you to keep Riddhe out of the loop and in his room.”

“My deepest apologies, master.”

Watching the scene, the usually talkative Riddhe found himself at a loss for words. He didn’t know what to think or feel.

Loid ordered Albert to leave, and though the servant wanted to linger for Riddhe’s sake, Loid insisted on them being left alone. With a final, worried glance at Riddhe, the young servant left the room.

Alone, Loid checked that no one was at the door before speaking.

“You’ve always been bad at hiding emotions and keeping secrets; that is why I have not told you about this until now. But I guess it is time...”

With that, Loid filled Riddhe in on the hard truth.



HOUSE Sutherland was well-known for serving House Chester with loyalty ever since King Estel, its founding father, established Heiland, so the story Loid told was shocking.

“As you have guessed, that man is an Erdalian. He acts as a messenger between me and a certain someone in Erdal.”

“Someone...? Is it Crown Prince Fritz?”

“When His Highness Fritz begins his reign...”

That was what the strange man had said, but his father just snorted at Riddhe’s guess.

“The crown prince is merely thirteen, certainly too young to be plotting anything.”

Riddhe nodded. That said, Princess Alicia was only ten years old, yet she was interfering with politics.

“I cannot tell you who it is yet, but it is someone influential.”

Riddhe clenched his hands into fists, his nails digging hard into the skin. Whether Loid noticed or not, he continued speaking in a mild tone.

“You must know of the empress’s wish for Princess Alicia and the crown prince to wed. That official’s goal is to see it happen as soon as possible.”

“But isn’t His Majesty against such a union?”

It was common knowledge that King James had turned down countless offers from the empress regarding the matter.

Loid’s smile was sarcastic as he replied, “Since you have been to Erdal, you will know that with our current standing, Heilland cannot turn down the empress’s demands forever. Erdal has amassed so much power that no other country comes close.”

Thus, Loid believed the marriage between Crown Prince Fritz and Princess Alicia was inevitable. It could happen soon or ten years down the road. As such, he had started to prepare for that future. He had to ensure that after the crown prince ascended to the throne as Heilland’s king, the Privy Council would remain intact and just as influential.

The future king must show no disrespect towards the Privy Council, and he should pursue any political changes in harmony.

“I have entered into a cooperative relationship with the Erdalian official on these conditions. For my part of the deal, I will advise the king to accept a betrothal between the crown prince and princess and suppress any resistance from the other Privy Council members. It is what I have to do.”

“But is that really all there is to it?” Riddhe’s voice trembled as he appealed to his father, wishing desperately for Loid to deny the fact. “You mentioned the proposed company when you spoke with the man... You said you’d ensure it would never be approved as part of your promise. Was that why you forced the postponement of the decision? That means...” Riddhe’s voice trailed off. He had always boasted of his amazing intuition, but he resented it now.

When did it happen?

When did his respectable father become Erdal’s dog?

“Why?!” His voice was full of pain, and he was on the verge of tears. “Do we really have to collude with Erdal like this? Even if Fritz takes the throne one day, the Sutherlands will show him how to do things right. We can make him understand that we’re the ones who’ve been serving this kingdom all along!”

“Grow up, son.” Loid’s gaze was cold as he refuted his son’s pleading, sitting on the sofa. “Ideals alone cannot move people. Speaking like that makes you the same as that naïve princess.”

Riddhe clutched at his hair, his heart stained with despair as his father’s words dripped like cold poison.

“Face the facts. You can concoct a naïve fantasy with a glorious hero, but if we fail, all the traditions and pride we have accumulated through the generations will be taken away. In the worst case, the kingdom could perish. Are you willing to be responsible for that?”

“No...”

Riddhe was not an irrational child. He knew that power and influence always won out. That was why the princess’s genuine belief in justice and her supportive adviser irked him so much.

And yet...

“I understand, Father.” Riddhe’s voice was low and hoarse as if torn from his throat. He looked at his father with dark, clouded eyes.

At the end of the day, Loid was still the head of House Sutherland. Nothing bad had ever happened from following his father’s will, right? Riddhe desperately wanted to convince himself.

“If it helps to protect the order of Heilland, then I will obey your wishes.”

“Good.” Loid placed a comforting hand on Riddhe’s shoulder, but the weight of it made Riddhe wince. “Sometimes, we have to get our hands dirty to do what we believe is right. You will soon succeed me as head of House Sutherland, so remember that well.”

When Riddhe finally regained control of his mind, his father had already left the room. The familiar surroundings, however, unnerved him. The room seemed twice as large and empty.

Putting his head in his hands, he let out a muffled sob.



THE next day, Riddhe resumed his duties of visiting the other Privy Council members, choosing Albert as his escort.

Albert fully expected Riddhe to interrogate him along the way and was surprised when he didn’t. From the moment he boarded the carriage to when he alighted, Riddhe remained weirdly silent.

Having grown up together, Albert fully understood why.

“Do you know, Al? My father is so wonderful, so amazing!!”

When they were little, Riddhe’s large eyes always shone when he spoke of his father. Even as he grew older and became arrogant, his admiration for Loid did not change.

And now, that very same father was colluding with the Erdalians.

Maybe it could even be said that Loid was working for them.

After completing their visit to the first mansion, Albert changed the day’s plans and stopped the carriage on the bank of the Eram River. Getting off the

driver's seat, he was about to knock on the carriage door when it opened first, revealing a pale Riddhe.

"Hey, Al. This doesn't look like the Burns's family mansion."

"We are slightly ahead of schedule, so I drove us here. You used to love the scenery at the Eram River, right? When we were young, you always asked me to bring you here whenever we came to the royal capital."

"...Why bring up such old stories now?"

Albert had expected Riddhe to complain, but the young man just dragged himself tiredly off the carriage. He noticed faint black shadows under his master's eyes.

Riddhe's back seemed unusually frail as he looked out over the Eram River in a silent daze. If the breeze was a little stronger, he might collapse on the spot. As Albert's mind filled with worry, Riddhe spoke again.

"When did Father start meeting with that man?"

It wasn't a question; Riddhe was talking to himself. Despite that, Albert shook his head and answered, "I only learned about this right before we came to the royal capital, so I don't know of anything before that. However, the servants are all vaguely aware that His Grace is secretly plotting something."

"Is that so?"

Albert nodded as Riddhe turned around, slightly surprised.

To be honest, Albert had no idea who Loid had been meeting or who he was connected with. All he knew was that the duke had told him to ensure that Riddhe and the visitor never crossed paths.

Of course, judging by the snippets of conversation he'd overheard, Albert had also guessed that the visitor was from Erdal. That said, Albert had served House Sutherland since his father's time, and he knew how to be a good servant. Thus, he had not pried further, simply following orders and working to keep Riddhe and the man from seeing each other.

If he had been sure of one thing, it was that Loid was doing everything to keep his schemes from Riddhe. And the reason could just be, as Loid himself

said, that Riddhe was bad at keeping secrets, but Albert sensed that it was not the only reason.

“...Well, no matter how long it’s been, it doesn’t really matter now,” Riddhe said with a self-deprecating smile, or was he being sarcastic? “There’s no way Father will listen to me. If only I had known of it sooner... But thinking that way is useless.”

Albert disagreed, but he swallowed his words.

Perhaps Loid had kept Riddhe in the dark because he knew how Riddhe would react and that it would weaken his resolve. Unlike his son, Loid always guarded his emotions well, so Albert couldn’t be sure what he was thinking, but surely a father would be pleased to have his son look up to him with respect.

Just like how Riddhe was always terrified of disappointing his father, especially when he lost to Clovis, Loid, too, could have been afraid of disappointing his son because he had chosen a controversial path. But it was not a servant’s place to point any of this out. So Albert kept his mouth shut. It didn’t change his belief that if only Riddhe had known the truth earlier, they probably wouldn’t be here today.

“Let’s go. Looking at this river just makes me think of things.”

“...All right.”

Riddhe turned towards the carriage as Albert opened the door.

Then...

“Riddhe?”

A clear soprano voice, crisp as a bird gliding through the air. It sounded so familiar, and when Albert noticed the speaker, his eyes grew wide. She was hidden within a hooded cloak the last time they met, but there was no mistake.

It was Alicia Chester, the princess of Heiland.



“...**YOUR** Highness. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I had some errands to run nearby, and I thought I saw you standing by the

river.”

The young girl glanced at her carriage and adviser behind her. And there Clovis was, right beside his beloved mistress. However, the sight of the man didn't irritate Riddhe today.

...Errands. I see.

Even without asking, Riddhe knew that the princess was out and about speaking to the lords of the Privy Council. He'd seen her carriage parked outside the Ridley Mansion just the other day.

What was different today was Alicia's expression. She seemed much happier than the last time they met.

Just how hardy was she?

She was so young but so unafraid to face forward. Though astonished, Riddhe was frankly impressed but frowned the next moment, reminded of his own misery.

“...I'll be taking my leave then.”

“Wait!”

Unable to stamp out the darkness in his heart, Riddhe turned to go, but the princess's voice held him back. He turned toward her reluctantly.

“Does Your Highness require something from me?” he muttered listlessly.

“Please tell me.” Her sky-blue eyes stared right at him, and he suddenly felt uncomfortable. “It's regarding what we spoke about the last time. Is it true you acknowledge the need for the wide-area trading company?”

“Tell your master that we Sutherlands never break a promise. I will bury the idea of the wide-area trading company with my own hands.”

Riddhe inadvertently averted his gaze, his heart clenching as he recalled his father's words. Alicia leaned towards him.

“I would like your support for our proposal.”

“My support? Your adviser was the one who rebuked me the last time,” Riddhe sneered, his lip curled with irritation.

Behind him, Albert sighed softly, while Clovis just frowned. Alicia was the only one who seemed unaffected, appealing to Riddhe once again.

“What is important is whether the company is the right move for Heiland. Isn’t that the issue? If you really feel the same way, there is no reason for us to fight—”

“Please stop,” Riddhe yelled, cutting the princess off. “I am the heir of House Sutherland! My father decides what the Sutherlands should or should not do. I can’t stay a child forever and chase ideals!!”

A moment later, Riddhe realized what he’d said and looked up in panic. The princess was staring at him, surprised, while Clovis narrowed his eyes in suspicion. Riddhe bit his lip nervously.

He carried a dark secret inside him.

No matter how he tried, he remained unconvinced, struggling to justify his father’s actions. And did that not make him an accomplice as well?

As Riddhe struggled with himself, Princess Alicia turned her gaze to the Eram River, as if she were reliving long-distant memories.

“As you said, it is not always right to chase ideals. But no one knows what is right and what is wrong. It is only at the very end when one realizes one’s foolishness.”

Riddhe frowned. “...That’s a weird way to put it. What do you mean, the very end?”

“It’s just a figure of speech,” Princess Alicia replied with a troubled smile.

She was clearly avoiding the true answer, but somehow it didn’t offend Riddhe. In fact, he felt like he was getting to know the princess for the first time.

“I will continue down a path I believe in, so I won’t have any regrets in the future... What do you want to do?”

The princess’s determined gaze stirred up unbearable envy in Riddhe’s chest.



THE wheels rattled as Riddhe leaned his chin on his hand, gazing out the window as the carriage swayed.

“What do you want to do?”

Princess Alicia had left him with those words as if permitting him to do as he pleased. It was absurd. He was the heir of House Sutherland, the most prosperous family in the kingdom. How could he possibly be unhappy about following his father’s will?

She’s too carefree, that princess. Of course, she’s still just a child, after all.

Things like ideals and justice would never move the Privy Council.

Caught in a complex web of opposing interests, each lord fought for dominance and argued for things that benefited themselves. Even the proud Privy Council wasn’t immune to nobles prioritizing their own interests above others.

And for generations, the head of House Sutherland had navigated these rough waters with keen eyes, making sure that no one disrupted the kingdom’s order.

And wasn’t it the same this time? His father planned to stamp out any seeds of unrest that would arise from welcoming Fritz, a foreigner, into Heilland. He was dirtying his hands for the future of their kingdom. It was nothing to be ashamed of...

A man worthy of the Sutherland name.

Riddhe closed his eyes as he thought back on their meeting.

If he hadn’t met Princess Alicia today, he would have been able to separate what he longed to believe about his father from the memories of his childhood. When Loid had spoken so truthfully to him that day, Riddhe had been more than ready to discard his feelings and follow his father’s will.

However, the sight of Alicia pursuing the path she believed in without a shred of doubt stirred something in Riddhe’s heart. He envied the princess and how she held onto her beliefs with pride, as well as her adviser, who supported her so wholeheartedly.

What was he doing?

Was he getting closer to becoming the person he'd always admired?

Was the father whom Riddhe admired still there?

Was he still a man worthy of the Sutherland name?

“Stop! Stop the carriage now!!”

With a sudden shout, Riddhe banged on the wall of the carriage, shocking Albert in the driver's seat.

As the servant hurriedly pulled the carriage to a stop along the side of the road, Riddhe jumped out. In the blink of an eye, he'd climbed up to sit beside Albert, gripping him by the collar.



“You said you only learned of this recently, but you were always present when Father met with that man, right?”

“H-Huh...?”

“Right?!”

Albert’s eyes widened in shock at Riddhe’s threatening tone. The young master had been so listless lately, but his eyes sparkled brightly now as he stared at Albert.

Slowly, the servant nodded, but the grip around his collar only tightened as Riddhe leaned in, giving Albert nowhere to hide.

“Tell me everything. All you’ve seen or heard. Everything.”

“But, young master, what about our next appointment?”

“Argh! That can wait!! I have to hear everything you know and decide if it is right to follow Father’s will. I’ll give you as much time as you need! I am the heir of House Sutherland, and I will choose my own path!!”

A hint of displeasure was in Riddhe’s tone, and his usual arrogance was back. For some reason, it made Albert glad, and he grinned cheerfully.



...**THREE** days later, the Privy Council met again.

3. A Song of Prayer Sung in the Heart

A week later, the noble lords gathered again in that windowless hall in Egdiel Castle.

Some seemed curious, while others were tense, each wondering who would control the discussion today. Of course, Privy Council heavyweight Loid Sutherland could dominate the room again, similar to the last session. Rumors abounded that the conservative nobles had rallied behind Loid during the past week.

On the flip side, Chief Adviser Nigel Otto, District Commissioner Dan Dreyfus, and proposal author Princess Alicia and her adviser Clovis Cromwell had also accumulated allies, which could sway opinions in the room.

Everyone held their breath, waiting to see who would speak first.

Thus, King James declared the discussion open to all.



WITHOUT any sunlight, only the shining chandelier illuminated the room.

Alicia watched the lords glance around, guessing each other's motives.

Just like the last time, Clovis sat next to her, and the dignified Loid towered on the opposite end of the room, with Riddhe by his side. The only difference today was a distant, unfocused gaze replaced Riddhe's sharp glare towards Clovis.

"...And that is the result of the joint investigation of the proposal conducted by the Ministries of Justice and Finance. To sum it up, there are no issues of concern, either legally or financially, associated with establishing the Mercurius Company," concluded Attorney General Colin Adams.

After the last meeting concluded, the two ministries were tasked with reexamining the proposal. Since the advisory office and district council first submitted the proposal, the investigation couldn't be assigned to them to

ensure fairness. However, they were also busy as they called on Jude Nicol, Marquis of Rozen and executor of the proposal, to answer some questions.

Although Clovis and the other advisers put the proposal together, the idea had come from Princess Alicia herself. A sense of relief flooded through the hall when the attorney general announced that nothing criminal was found in the proposal.

“Of course. I wouldn’t have allowed a slipshod proposal to be submitted in my council’s name. This investigation only happened because everyone was needlessly worried,” Dreyfus grumbled unhappily.

Loid’s lips lifted in a graceful smile, though his eyes remained cold and sharp, like a bird of prey, as he looked at the district commissioner. “It is no problem. The proposal holds more water after passing the investigation. Now, Dreyfus, the district council has not been sitting idle this past week, has it? Is there something you should tell everyone?”

“...Yes, well, you’re right,” Dreyfus mumbled as he stood with reluctance.

Dreyfus was a man who deemed honesty a virtue, so he was not known to hide the truth, even if it was to his disadvantage. Even in high society, where everyone was always looking to get ahead of everyone else, he remained steadfast in having honest, open discussions.

“There is something I have to report.”

“What is it? Has something happened?” Fudge Hobbs—Duke of Geras and a conservative noble who opposed establishing the company last time—asked as he leaned back against his chair. Dreyfus’s thick brows drew down into a frown.

“I discovered something strange when I spoke to Jude regarding the establishment of the company. He told me that the merchants he was considering cooperating with have been turning him down one after the other.”

“What? In that case, why are we even discussing the proposal anymore?” Fudge asked with a shrug.

“Because it is still too early to determine if this will undermine the company’s establishment,” Daniel Bain, Marquis of Haber and supporter of the proposal, argued. “Our artisans’ products are highly trusted by foreign customers, so we

believe the Mercurius Company will generate enormous profits. That's also why the merchants are keen to work with us. It's not right to discard the proposal as impossible or useless just because a few have turned us down."

"Bain is right. Lord Nicol is still working to secure more merchants. This isn't the end of the road."

"Nevertheless, we are assembled today to decide if the Privy Council approves the proposal. We need to have a clear answer."

"Of course."

Loid's glare swept over the nobles in the moderate camp, and several who supported the proposal shrank down in their seats like frogs targeted by a snake.

"The Privy Council cannot approve a proposal that may not come to fruition. Everything in this world has its rightful time and place, and now is not the right time for the company."

The conservative nobles piped up in assent following Loid's declaration. The duke looked satisfied as he held his curved nose high.



ALICIA watched the scene with sky-blue eyes like it was happening in a distant world. The moderates came up with counterarguments, looking for a breakthrough, while the opposition looked on with casual grins, already confident in their victory.

What held her attention was not the Privy Council's fiery debate, but the silent Riddhe Sutherland. Her resolve wavered as the young lord avoided her gaze. But she had a job to do. She had to stay focused for the sake of her kingdom's future and the people who believed in her.

Glancing to the side, she exchanged a look with Clovis. The black-haired adviser's expression remained serious as he gave a small nod, giving Alicia courage.

...All right, time for our counterattack.

Alicia stood up as the nobles continued their verbal battle throughout the

hall. Aside from the advisers who knew of her plan, the first to notice Alicia was Loid Sutherland, whose glare swiveled towards her.

“Is something the matter, Your Highness?”

The heated debate among the council members quieted immediately at Loid’s low but resonant voice as they focused on the young princess. Some appeared shocked to see her getting ready to join the discussion.

Taking a deep breath, Alicia opened her lips.

“I—?”

Alicia’s voice cracked as it left her parched throat, sounding like a baby bird’s chirp. The stern faces of the noble lords morphed into surprise, and her father let out a snicker behind her.

“...Would you like some water?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Alicia coughed, her face scarlet. The tense atmosphere in the hall dissipated as even Loid waited patiently for Alicia to gather herself. And she might have imagined it, but she thought she saw the look of a concerned father in the duke’s expression.

Stay strong, keep it together!

This was just like that time when she ventured into the castle town. The duke before her was not a monster or demon. He might be a formidable lord with a hidden motive, but at that moment, he was a normal person and somebody’s father.

And now she would go head-to-head with him.

“...I would like to clear something up before the Privy Council makes a decision about the company.”

“Oh, and what would that be?”

Suddenly, the elderly man who showed concern for her was gone, replaced by the fierce and sharp-eyed duke who held sway over the Privy Council. Alicia braced herself and stood straight, refusing to show fear.

“There is an obstacle preventing the establishment of the Mercurius Company. If we can get rid of that, there should be no more pressing concerns, and we can make a decision from a fair perspective, right?”

“Yes, Your Highness, you are absolutely right... So, do you perhaps have an idea of what the obstacle is?”

“I do.”

Loid raised a brow at Alicia’s cool answer.

“That is wonderful. Would you like to share your thoughts with the Privy Council?”

The noble lords in the hall held their breath throughout the tense exchange between Alicia and Loid, not wanting to miss a single word. Feeling countless eyes on her, Alicia opened her mouth.

“Someone is leaking information about the company to Erdal and sabotaging our plans, and I think the culprit is here with us today.”

The great hall was silent before erupting into turmoil as the implication of the princess’s words registered.

Loid’s gaze locked onto Clovis before moving to Nigel, then King James, as if confirming if they knew what Alicia was going to say. The look in his eyes sharpened.

“Well, well, so there is someone among us breaking the sacred code of the Privy Council and leaking classified information... That is a very grievous accusation. Do you have any proof?”

Though it seemed like he was speaking to Alicia, Loid’s gaze was directed at the two advisers. The battleground had shifted away from her as if she were no longer the duke’s opponent.

Before she could speak, Clovis stood up and placed a hand on his chest in respect. “Your Highness, if I may take over.”

“...Yes, please do.”

Clovis’s smile was confident and beautiful, reassuring Alicia to leave everything to him. It reminded her of when her adviser held her in his arms,

stirring up a restless feeling in her heart.

Clovis stepped into the center of the hall as if to shield Alicia from Loid's frightfully cold stare. The duke was so intimidating that even the conservative nobles who thought Clovis was lowly worried for him.

"So it is you, Cromwell. You were doing so well until you started serving under Her Highness, and now you seem to have forgotten your place. Are you trying to mock the Privy Council?"

"Not at all. I am merely here to support Her Highness as her adviser. I have no intention of undermining the proud Privy Council, except for a particular someone."

"Oh. So you think you know who the traitor is?" Loid's sarcastic smile turned eerie under the light of the swaying chandelier. "Speak clearly, then. I highly doubt there is a traitor among us. Know that if the accusation is false, you will have to face the rightful consequences."

"I am prepared to do so. Should that happen, I swear to withdraw from my position as adviser and leave the royal household."

Alicia wanted to scream, but she settled for clasping her hands tightly in prayer instead as she stared at her adviser's back as he stood up against Loid.

Under the scrutiny of countless eyes, Clovis slowly raised his right hand and pointed at Loid Sutherland. "You, Duke of Sheraford, are the one colluding with Erdal."

Clovis's deep, clear voice echoed quietly and solemnly throughout the stone hall. The duke stared at the adviser sternly, his expression unmoving, as the Privy Council members shouted all at once.

"That is preposterous!"

"How dare you accuse House Sutherland, who has supported the monarchy since our founding days?"

"This is an insult not only to the Privy Council but to all the nobles of Heiland!"

"An insult! A mockery!"

“Wait, my lords!”

Mac Grant, Marquis of Morris, spoke up to silence the chaotic voices of the council members. While he was a supporter of the proposal, he, too, seemed shocked at the sudden accusation against Loid. Gazing at Clovis with an equally doubtful yet hopeful look, he appealed to the nobles again.

“Lord Cromwell must have good reason to indict Lord Sutherland. We all know he does a commendable job as an adviser, so why don’t we listen to what he has to say before we make a judgment?”

“Thank you for your kind words,” Clovis murmured as he placed his hand on his chest and bowed deeply. “I suspected that our discussion here was being leaked to outsiders after receiving some news from the Marquis of Rozen.”

With that, Clovis produced a letter from Jude and passed it to Dreyfus, who read the contents with his thick brows furrowed. “The merchants asked to join the Mercurius Company have been turning him down one after the other... Isn’t this exactly what the district council has reported?”

“The issue lies with who these merchants are.”

Prompted by Clovis, Dreyfus turned to the second page, which contained a list of merchants Jude had called upon and their responses. Dreyfus’s stern glare slowly morphed into surprise as he read on.

“Hey, this list is wrong. There are names here that were not submitted to the district council,” he grumbled in annoyance.

Clovis just smiled.

“Yes. Lord Nicol says that this is the true, complete list of merchants he approached.”

“What? So the list he gave me was incomplete?!” Dreyfus bellowed angrily.

In other words, Jude was the only one who possessed the full list of candidate merchants asked to join the company. Alicia’s sky-blue eyes widened at the reveal.

“In truth, Lord Nicol contacted thirteen different merchants. Three were extremely keen to cooperate, but Lord Nicol did not submit their names to the

district council or the advisory office. Even Her Highness and I were in the dark regarding this.”

“Damn that Jude! Why does he keep lying to us!” The bearded district commissioner yelled as he slammed a hand on the table.

“The marquis had his reasons,” Clovis explained, eyes lowered in respect.

The three merchants were old friends of Jude, and each was an excellent tradesman with a wide network of contacts. Based on this trust, Jude shared his vision of the company with them. However, since the proposal was still being deliberated by the Privy Council, such information was a state secret. It would be a huge problem if these three merchants were targeted by business rivals and forced to reveal that information.

“To protect confidential information regarding the company, Lord Nicol didn’t reveal the identity of the three merchants while the proposal was being deliberated by the Privy Council.”

“I see, so that’s it...” Dreyfus nodded before his anger took hold again, “But still!! To keep a secret from Her Highness?! He must be mad! That’s why I hate him!!”

“Calm down, Dreyfus,” Attorney General Adams cut in impatiently. “Now is not the time to discuss your discord with Lord Nicol. Cromwell, continue.”

Clovis bowed gratefully. “Thank you. Looking at the letter, you can tell that those three merchants are not on the list of those who turned down the offer to join the company. It gave Lord Nicol confirmation that the proposal was not the problem, so he approached the other merchants to try to change their minds.”

According to Jude, the other merchants acted strangely, resolutely refusing to meet him. It aroused Jude’s suspicions, and when he finally caught up with one of them, the man fearfully revealed that he had been threatened to turn down the offer.

However, the merchant refused to reveal who had threatened him. Relying on his network, Jude launched an investigation and soon discovered that the merchant had gotten into an argument with some strangers in an alley a day

after the previous Privy Council meeting. According to an eyewitness, the men were persuading the merchant to refuse some offer, and when the merchant blew them off, they cut the conversation short and left.

“The day after that, someone broke into the merchant’s house and utterly destroyed the property. Thankfully, no money or goods were taken, but the merchant seemed pale and afraid.”

“I see. So the purpose of the crime was not to steal but to threaten the merchant to turn down the offer to join the new company?”

“We cannot confirm that unless we have the culprits, but the merchant must have believed that. After the incident, he sent a letter to Lord Nicol to turn down the offer.”

Having discovered this, Jude quickly worked to gather information on the other merchants. All ten merchants on the list submitted to the Privy Council were contacted by suspicious men over several days. On the other hand, the three merchants whose identities were withheld were not contacted by anyone, despite their enthusiasm to join the company.

At this point, the Marquis of Rozen was sure that someone was working to sabotage their plans. All these details that led to his conclusion were written meticulously in a report Jude submitted to Clovis, delivered directly to Egdiel Castle by a trusted individual.

“The only ones with access to that list of merchants are the advisory office, district council, His Majesty, Her Highness, and the Privy Council. Naturally, the culprit who threatened those merchants could only be one of these people.”

“Of course, the members of the advisory office and district council should be cleared of suspicion since they support the establishment of the company.”

“That cannot be confirmed. There’s a chance that a member of the advisory office or, though I hate to admit it, the district council, may personally be against the proposal and misuse the list.” Dreyfus’s expression was bitter, but his words were true and honest.

But Clovis shook his head.

“If the culprit is part of the advisory office or district council, they would have

sabotaged the proposal before it reached the Privy Council. Once the council makes a decision, it becomes a national movement, so the better strategy would be to end things quietly and peacefully without summoning the council.”

An unpleasant silence followed the young adviser’s clear explanation. Fearfully, the gazes of the gathered nobles landed on the silent Loid Sutherland. Alicia suddenly felt suffocated, as if the walls and ceiling were closing in on her. She didn’t want to believe the accusation...but it seemed more likely by the moment.

Everyone’s attention remained fixed on Clovis and Loid amid the confusion and suspicion. Amidst the tension, where a single misstep by either party could lead to their downfall, Clovis remained standing with his back to Alicia.

Was Clovis afraid?

Previously, he’d confessed with embarrassment to losing sleep before the Privy Council meeting, so it would be natural for him to be anxious in this tense situation.

At that moment, Clovis turned to look at Alicia.

It was a glance that lasted a moment, so fast that no one would have wondered why the man had chosen to look back. However, Alicia knew otherwise. In that instance, which didn’t even last the blink of an eye, Clovis had given her a relieved smile.

Suddenly, Alicia’s chest hurt like it was being squeezed as her cheeks warmed with emotion welling up inside her.

I want to become Clovis’s strength.

“Your efforts gave me strength. I can face anything for your sake.”

Remembering her adviser’s kind words, Alicia clasped her hands before her face. Even if those were words spoken just to soothe his depressed mistress, as long as her existence could bring the smallest benefit to him, she wanted to become a power to support Clovis.

Despite standing behind him, Alicia’s heart was right next to Clovis at that moment, their strong bond standing together in the face of a formidable

enemy: Loid Sutherland.

“So.”

Suddenly, Loid spoke. Despite the accusation, the duke’s face remained stoic like a mask as he watched the proceedings coldly, making it impossible to know what he was thinking. Ignoring the frightened nobles, Loid leveled his gaze at Clovis.

“So, why me?”

“Why?”

“Rubbish. You know exactly why,” Dreyfus grumbled.

“From your report, we know there’s an unscrupulous person threatening the merchants on that list. However, your accusation is that I am colluding with Erdal. Your report does not show any proof of that, does it?” Loid pointed out.

“That is true,” Clovis responded with a smile. “I requested the knights of the Imperial Guard to look through the records of people entering the Marquisate of Rozen, but they couldn’t weed out the culprit from there. Also, the only people who have visited Rozen this past week were merchants or knights, as well as officials from the district council.”

“...Well, in that case—”

“But someone has given us information.”

Loid’s expression changed for the first time that day, but a casual shrug quickly replaced the faint glimpse of surprise. “Interesting. Has someone seen me speaking to an Erdalian spy?”

“Not only that. Our source has also confirmed that you hire unsavory men with criminal backgrounds, getting them to masquerade as tradesmen to perform your dirty work. Those men were sent to the Marquisate of Rozen to threaten the merchants on that list.”

“Hmph! The prosperous trading post of Viola is in the Duchy of Sheraford. If I were to hire spies, it’s only natural that they masquerade as tradesmen. Your source has woven a convincing story, but I am bored of listening.”

A loud crack of wood on stone rang out as Loid struck his cane on the ground,

making the other lords jump in surprise. The man was confident, looking around the hall as if he had already won the argument.

“Bring your source here. I will strike their nonsense down myself.”

“I am already here.”

It was the first time this voice had spoken out today.

Alicia’s vision wavered nervously, but she had to see this to the end.

Under the gazes of Alicia, Clovis, King James, and the assembled nobles, the man clenched his teeth and stood tall. Loid’s eyes widened in shock.

“I am the source!”

Glaring straight at his father, Riddhe Sutherland leaned forward as he shouted at the astonished nobles of the Privy Council. His red hair was slightly disheveled, and the dark circles beneath his eyes gave them an unnatural glow, but his determination drove him on.

Pressing a hand to his chest as if to encourage himself, Riddhe spoke loudly again.

“On the name of House Sutherland, I, Riddhe, indict Loid Sutherland!”



“I need your help to indict my father.”

Two days before the Privy Council’s second meeting, Riddhe had come before Alicia and Clovis with Robert’s help, head deeply bowed.

Riddhe had seemed strange when they met along the bank of the Eram River the previous day, and Alicia had felt concerned, unable to forget the exhausted look on the young lord’s face. That was why she granted Riddhe an audience, but not even Clovis could have predicted the outrageous truth that Riddhe exposed.

“My father is the one rallying the nobles to oppose your proposal. If he makes a miscalculation, the obstacles blocking your way will vanish. That should work to your advantage.”

Riddhe’s words were harsh, but his earnestness touched Alicia’s heart. As

Loid's son, he couldn't bear to see his highly respected father stray further from the right path. As such, Alicia agreed to Riddhe's plan to confront his father during the Privy Council meeting.

...Don't give in to yourself or to your father.

The complicated emotions swirling in Riddhe's heart were painfully obvious in his pale complexion and the way his trembling hands gripped the table.

They'd had quite a few issues with Riddhe. Especially Clovis, whose dislike of the man stretched back to when they were part of the inspection squad. However, Alicia couldn't help but push the past to one side and root for Riddhe now.



THE shocking spectacle of the future head of a noble house indicting the current head wiped the day's agenda from everyone's minds, as they stared at the father and son of House Sutherland.

"Are you being serious?" Fudge Hobbs, Duke of Geras and close friend of House Sutherland spoke up on behalf of the others. He had known Riddhe since he was a child, and his tone sounded like a reprimand. "You do understand what it means to indict the head of your house."

"Of course." Riddhe's voice remained strong. "If the indictment is successful, House Sutherland will lose the duchy and all our prestige. If it fails, my father will sever all ties with me. Either way, I'm already on the path to ruin, but it is my pride to have Sutherland's blood flowing in my veins. That's why I have to stand up now!"

"...Don't be foolish." Everyone jumped at the sound of the steely voice that echoed through the hall. Betrayed by an unexpected opponent, Loid's eyes burned with rage. "Do you know what you are doing, boy? You are the heir of House Sutherland. Do you not understand my beliefs, my motives?!"

"I do... And also because I respect you!! That's why I know it's my duty to stop you when you stray from the right path, Father!!"

"Stray, from the path?"

“Yes,” Riddhe whispered with a frown, his hand clutching his chest as if his heart ached. “Father, you told me you have to do this to protect Heilland, but your top priority isn’t our kingdom. It is the Privy Council’s power. Even if your actions end up saving our kingdom, I can’t help but feel that it is the wrong choice!”

“What...?!” For a moment, Loid seemed at a loss for words. Then his rage took over as he burst out at his son. “Silence! You are my son!! Do not disobey me!!”

Riddhe’s face twisted at his father’s harsh tone, but he stood firm. “Please stop this, Father. Please confess and repent.”

“I have not done anything shameful. There is nothing to repent.”

“But I heard you say that you made a deal with an official from Erdal. You even promised the messenger that you would prevent the establishment of the new company.”

“And what about that? You may very well be lying to betray me.”

“That’s not all! One of our servants confessed to helping you pass secret letters to the man who comes once a week to deliver bread to the mansion. That was how you sent the message to your hired hands to threaten those merchants, right?!”

“Stop this!” Loid’s voice rose in panic before his lips curled in a triumphant smirk. “All you claim to have heard or witnessed is conjecture. If you intend to indict me, then produce the evidence. Not that you have any because it does not exist!”

Riddhe bit his lip in despair. “...Do you really not intend to come clean about this, Father?”

Watching the confrontation between father and son, the assembled nobles were slowly convinced that there was no evidence to back up any of Riddhe’s claims. As the heir to the duchy, Riddhe’s statement should be highly credible, but it wasn’t enough to topple Loid’s unshakable position. In the end, he would emerge the victor, while his errant son would quietly slink off in defeat...

“...I have evidence.”

“What?”

“I said, I have evidence! Cromwell!!”

“Yes.”

At Riddhe’s call, Clovis drew a rolled piece of paper from his pocket. Loid frowned in confusion, but his expression changed as if he’d realized something.

“It can’t be.”

“It can. I didn’t want us to come to this, but I have no choice, Father.”

“Please look at this, Your Majesty.”

“I shall.”

Loid wavered as Clovis passed the paper to King James. After reviewing the contents with a serious face, the king closed his eyes and let out a small sigh.

“It is an oath, signed by Loid Sutherland and an Erdalian... It is written in a lost language, but every Heillander and Erdalian is aware of what this means.”

An oath sworn under the heavens. An oath sworn between comrades.

Every lord of the Privy Council knew what King James was referring to.

This was the oath the founding father, King Estel, pledged to his subjects when they first built Heilland together. The oath meant that two parties could trust each other and would never betray each other.

“Your Erdalian official should have a copy of this as well, with the crest of House Sutherland stamped on it. Your copy here has this.”

The lords let out a collective groan as King James held the piece of paper up. For everyone’s benefit, Chief Adviser Nigel explained the significance of the stamped crest.

“The black horse of Julius the Conqueror, a crest used only by members of Erdal’s Senate. This is concrete proof that Lord Sutherland has ties to a high-ranking official in Erdal.”

“Impossible. Why is that here...?!” Loid asked, his eyes wide as sweat trailed down his brow.

“Because of your son and the loyal Sutherland household.” In contrast, Clovis remained graceful as he gestured to Riddhe. “Your Grace, you are a cautious man, which was why I thought we would never find any evidence linking you to Erdal.”

“I thought the same too, but I knew that despite your caution, you’d need to have physical evidence of the oath in case the other party breaks their promise,” Riddhe added with a shake of his head. “...I’ve always wanted to be just like you, Father. That’s why I know you so well.”

Convinced of the existence of physical evidence linking Loid to the Erdalians, Alicia, Clovis, and Riddhe carried out their plan.

The key was Albert, a young servant in the Sutherland household and Riddhe’s close companion. According to him, the servants were all aware that their master, the duke, was plotting something secretly. Thus, Riddhe and Albert had worked tirelessly to gather information from the servants while making sure not to arouse Loid’s suspicions.

It wasn’t easy getting the loyal servants to spill secrets about their master, but with the desperate pleas from the usually arrogant Riddhe and Albert’s smooth talk, they got everyone’s cooperation.

That said, the information they received was meager, and it was a painstaking task to piece everything together. However, the more evidence they gathered, the clearer the picture became, and they pinpointed a few possible locations where Loid could have met with the Erdalian messengers.

After that, it came down to the advisory office and Imperial Guard to sieve through the locations to look for suspicious documents. Finally, just as the sun dawned that day, they discovered the oath in one of the Sutherland’s family villas in Sheraford.

Chief Adviser Nigel rubbed at his brow, his fatigue after a long night of searching clear in his expression. “With the servants’ cooperation and, most importantly, Lord Riddhe’s help, we located the document and proof that Lord Sutherland has ties to Erdal.”

“Through the courage of many, the oath is here for all to see,” Clovis declared, eyes bright and staring straight at Loid. “This is it. Do you admit to

colluding with our neighboring country?”

A heavy silence cloaked the hall as no one moved, the swaying chandelier casting shadows on the scene. The faces of the Privy Council members were stiff as the scandalous affair was proven beyond doubt. Having done his part, Riddhe also stared at his father, his face pale and his body tense.

Finally, a dry laugh broke the silence.

It was Loid, his laughter slowly increasing in volume as he leaned back on his chair. Alicia’s heart broke. Loid sounded like a man who had just realized his own destruction.

Perhaps triggered by the duke, someone stood up and shouted.

“What are you doing?! Arrest him right away, Cromwell! He is a great sinner who betrayed our kingdom!”

“And what are we going to do after that? No member of House Sutherland has been placed in prison before!!”

“More importantly, what do we do now? Lord Sutherland, how could you?!”

“Everyone, calm down.”

King James’s sonorous voice cut through the noise as he rose. The conflicted nobles shut their mouths and bowed their heads in haste. Leaving his seat, the king walked to stand before Loid, who had fallen silent and sat with his head hanging.

“There is no need to hurry. The Loid I know is not a coward. He will not try to escape, will you?”

“But Your Majesty! The duke—!”

“I would like to speak with him... Nigel, if I may?”

“Anything you wish, Your Majesty.”

Nigel nodded as he stared at the assembled lords as if commanding them to hold the peace, and Clovis took the chance to move closer to Alicia. Loid bowed his head to his king. It was a dignified gesture from a noble who had served House Chester through the generations, and at that moment, the duke seemed

relieved, as if he'd just been granted release from a heavy burden.

"I will not run, nor will I hide. It is true that I have ties to Erdal and have leaked state secrets to them. You have every right to put me in prison."

"...No, Loid. You and I have always had our disagreements, but while I chased my ideals, you always shared your views as the embodiment of Heiland and its history."

"That is the role of the head of House Sutherland."

"You are right. Never snubbing the monarchy, even as you remain proud and noble, keeping a sharp eye on the kingdom to maintain its order, supporting each king through the generations as their toughest ally. Those were the heads of House Sutherland."

"....."

Sorrow swept through Alicia. She felt like weeping at her father's kind words. Perhaps Clovis sensed her emotion as well, for he placed a quiet hand on her shoulder.

Loid was probably aware that this was his last time coming before King James as a subject, for his expression remained strangely calm. "Your Majesty. Would I be permitted to address you as the head of House Sutherland?"

"Yes, go ahead."

"...I am deeply grateful for your kindness." Loid bowed his head, breaking eye contact with the king as he looked over at the faces of all the lords of the Privy Council. "Your Majesty, are you aware that we, the Privy Council, are in constant turmoil?"

"Turmoil?"

"Yes. We are always afraid of being left behind by the times. That all we have built up will prove to be useless."

Slowly, some of the lords lowered their gazes, deep in thought. Every one of them belonged to prestigious houses, holding important territories in Heiland and serving as the king's vassals.

"Times have changed. Our neighboring country, once far behind Heiland in

history and culture, has grown into an unparalleled power. We may share the same ancestors, but the difference between us and Erdal has become as wide as heaven and earth. Its strength undoubtedly lies in its empress and her efforts. Unifying the military, consolidating its politics, and now abolishing the feudal system. Her methods might be daring, but they have worked. That is why we are afraid. The empress has succeeded by taking away the one thing we have worked so hard to protect. If our treasured history, order, and traditions do not align with the times, they will be criticized and discarded. And in the end, Your Majesty, you might realize that you do not require the service of us lords any longer.”

Loid paused, his gaze moving towards the back of the throne. Alicia turned as well, seeing the tapestry that hung there, depicting the crest of House Chester surrounded by the crests of the five houses that had served the monarchy since its founding. The sight of Loid’s face as he looked upon the Sutherland crest seemed lonely.

“I wanted to get back at Erdal. The empress always gets what she wants. No matter how we protest, Prince Fritz and Princess Alicia will marry one day, and he will ascend to the throne as Heiland’s next king. When that happens, the prince will move to reform Heiland to be just like Erdal. But what lies beyond that will be chaos. Our kingdom’s order disrupted by rapid reforms, and everyone lost and confused. And before we know it, Heiland will become another part of the Erdalian empire. At that time, only the Privy Council will be able to defy the king and protect Heiland. We will maintain our kingdom’s order, protect its traditions, and show that we noble lords are not useless and are key to protecting what is important... That was why I decided to work for Erdal, in exchange for the promise that the Privy Council would not be dissolved.”

“...I see.”

King James gave a brief nod. The assembled lords kept their eyes lowered as if wanting to avoid catching anyone’s attention. Loid’s choice was wrong, but his speech resonated in their hearts, and no one could deny the truth in his words.

After a long silence, King James spoke up sternly. “I will have to punish you for illicit communications with our neighbor and leaking state secrets, which could

endanger our people. The citizens are our first priority. Heilland is not made up of its king or the Privy Council, nor is it made up of its traditions and order. Heilland exists because of its people.” The king’s almond-colored eyes narrowed with sadness at his next words. “But to have caused such unease that pushed you to commit such drastic acts is my own shortcoming. I could not inspire enough trust to ease my subjects’ minds, to make them believe they could work with me to overcome any obstacles.”

Loid shook his head. “...Your Majesty, that is—”

“You and I should have had a good chat with each other long before it came to this.” With that, King James took hold of Loid’s hand and beckoned for Alicia to join them. Giving the nervous girl a small smile, the king turned towards the Privy Council. “Everyone, listen well. As Loid has mentioned, times have changed. Our neighbor has undergone drastic changes, and we cannot resist them no matter how long our history is. Sometimes, it may be necessary to surrender ourselves to something new.”

“Does this mean Heilland will have to undergo reforms similar to Erdal’s, Your Majesty?” A noble lord piped up timidly.

“Yes. If we decide it is necessary for our people, then we have to start working on it.”

Even Nigel was surprised by the king’s straight answer. Of course, he was privy to the king’s thoughts as his adviser, but it was the first time King James had spoken publicly about the possibility of reform.

As expected, the lords in the hall looked disturbed. One duke’s face turned red as he stood up emotionally, while another marquis looked up at the ceiling in despair.

“But...” King James’s voice rang out, quieting the perturbed nobles as his eyes swept over every person, finally landing on Alicia. “Reform is not something to be rushed or forced upon anyone. Remember this well, Cia. A reform may seem perfect on paper, but if it does not align with the people’s hearts, it will lead to the kingdom’s ruin.”

“Y-Yes, Father.”

“The people in this hall are just as important as those living in the towns and cities, and House Chester will fight against anyone who disrespects any of Heilland’s people, even if that someone is our neighboring prince turned king. That is our duty.”

Alicia’s sky-blue eyes widened as her heart thundered. That responsibility was what the previous Alicia had discarded for the sake of love. Her father’s words carved all the more deeply into her heart.

The princess gave a nervous nod, which King James returned with a smile.

“I swear to everyone present that I will never force change upon the kingdom. However, should reform become necessary, I ask each lord, as a comrade, to lend us their support.”

“...Even if the Privy Council might not agree?” Loid asked.

King James smiled calmly. “Yes. Heilland has always chosen the right path through discussions and occasional conflicts. We will do our best to persuade the lords, and everyone should feel free to share their honest thoughts. If we really believe that reform is best for our people, then we will put in maximum effort to get approval from everyone. And if opinions are still divided at the end of the day, it just means that the reform proposed by the king is not what the people of Heilland want. So it is acceptable to voice your dissatisfaction and share your anxieties. If you agree, will you place your trust in me once again?”

With that, King James bowed his head to the Privy Council.

“Your Majesty...”

Despite his kind appearance, King James was a true strategist. Known for his fairness, everyone knew he would never use his authority to force orders upon others, but this was the first time he had ever spoken so openly. That sincerity shook the hearts of the assembled nobles. The unexpected betrayal of Lord Sutherland had torn apart the Privy Council, and it was painful to see their king’s appeal to unite them again.

Slowly, each lord stood up and bowed respectfully to the king. Surely unease lingered in their hearts, and the fragile unity holding them together might collapse with the slightest touch. However, they were responding to the king,

and Alicia's eyes grew hot at the sight. It was such a weak connection, but she knew they were her comrades. This unity was a small step that would help them build a new future.

"You always were the sweet talker," Loid chuckled softly. "You speak so well, but as the head of House Sutherland, I have to speak a word of warning. Heiland is on the brink of being swallowed up by Erdal. Your proud ideals and beliefs may no longer hold meaning in the face of such overwhelming power."

"What you say is painful but true."

"But... I am glad to have served as your subject, Your Majesty."

At Chief Adviser Nigel's signal, the Imperial Guards waiting by the door entered and led the quiet Lord Sutherland away.

"Father!"

Riddhe couldn't help but call out at the sight of his father being led away by the knights. Seeing as he was the one who pleaded with Alicia to help expose his father's sins, Knight Robert allowed the young lord a few moments with his father.

Loid had stopped and turned back at his son's voice, but Riddhe stood speechless, his heart swirling with a complex mix of emotions. Seeing the troubled look in Riddhe's eyes, Loid let out a small smile.

"I am sorry, and... You did well."

Tears welled up in Riddhe's eyes.

Only Fudge Hobbs, a close family friend of the Sutherlands, understood the meaning of their exchange. When he was little, Riddhe would often show off his knowledge with joy before his father, and Loid would always smile and praise Riddhe with those same words.

Desperately wiping away the tears that distorted his vision, Riddhe stared at Loid's back as if to burn the memory into his mind. Before long, the figure of the head of House Sutherland, surrounded by knights, retreated from view, and the door of the hall closed quietly.



AFTER the arrest of Lord Sutherland, the Privy Council meeting ended quickly.

Alicia was seated on the castle rooftop, gazing absentmindedly at the streets of Egdiel below. Watching the people moving about the city from a distance, the heated discussion about the new company's establishment and Loid's indictment seemed like a dream. Alicia swung her legs mindlessly.

Just then, a voice called out from behind her.

"Goodness. Your Highness is at that dangerous spot again."

Alicia turned around to see Clovis smiling wryly at her. His glossy black hair and pale skin were already a familiar sight to the princess.

"Is everything all right with the advisory office?" she asked. "Nigel and the others looked so busy."

"Our direction is mostly decided, so the meeting has ended. However, the real challenge for us still lies ahead."

After Loid was led away, deliberations on the new company were temporarily postponed. Instead, the Privy Council talked about how to deal with Loid and House Sutherland.

The advisory office was put to the test, tasked with pulling out past records to support the talks and decisions made. Even Clovis was roped in to help. Having fulfilled her role, Alicia had withdrawn quietly from the meeting.

Now, Clovis seemed unusually tired as he stood by her side. It was no wonder since he had been up all night searching for the document to incriminate Loid, engaging in a heated verbal battle with the man during the council meeting, and finally being involved in the aftermath.

Even so, he seemed concerned as he gazed at Alicia before seemingly making up his mind about something. "Your Highness, His Majesty has formally decided to imprison Lord Sutherland in Dowter Tower."

"Oh... I see."

Alicia closed her eyes to calm her racing heart. In Heiland, imprisonment was the second-most severe punishment after the death penalty. Moreover, imprisonment in Dowter Tower usually meant death. Sunlight never reached

the stone tower, and the stagnant air inside gradually ate away at the body, so those imprisoned never lived long.

Loid might have acted in the interest of the kingdom, but the sentence for his crime couldn't be reduced. By choosing to expose his crimes before the Privy Council, Alicia sealed the duke's fate. Even if it had been an indirect consequence, the thought that her decision would result in the loss of someone's life made Alicia's body freeze with terror. However, she had wanted to support Riddhe, who was determined to indict his father.

"Will the imprisonment at Dowter Tower be immediate? Loid may have things to tell us about the Erdalian spies."

"I agree. I think his interrogation will begin tomorrow."

"...I wonder if we can make time for Riddhe to see him."

"I will speak to Lord Nigel."

Alicia breathed a sigh of relief at Clovis's words as her adviser switched to talking about the new company in hopes of lightening the oppressive mood. It seemed like the council had some time to discuss more about the company after Alicia departed.

"The final decision has been postponed, but the Privy Council has decided to support the company. Everyone agreed we needed to close the economic gap between us and Erdal. Now, we can finally get Jude to start work."

"I see... That's great." Alicia smiled at the good news.

Of course, the new company still had to prove its worth, and those results would either open up or cut off her path towards becoming the next ruler. However, she stood at the starting line of the race, and the thought brought Alicia relief.

"Let us rest today. You'll collapse if you push yourself anymore. And thank you for everything." She wanted to express her deep gratitude for all Clovis had done for her, but she couldn't find the right words to embody those overflowing emotions. In the end, she turned fully towards Clovis and gave him her biggest smile.

But Clovis's expression seemed conflicted, and Alicia grew confused when the adviser did not leave. After a while, he let out an embarrassed smile.

"If that was a word of encouragement, could I perhaps be allowed to stay by Your Highness for a while longer?"

"Huh? Of course, if you wish."

Alicia nodded without thinking, and Clovis smiled contentedly as he leaned against the wall by her. Some time passed as the two enjoyed each other's quiet company, the breeze blowing through the castle town gently caressing their skin.

It felt pleasant, and before she knew it, the vague unease weighing Alicia down since she left the hall vanished. Stealing a glance at the handsome profile of the young man next to her, Alicia was reminded of how much Clovis had become part of her and how his support was invaluable.

Clovis turned to her with a small smile as if Alicia had been staring too long.

"Is there something on my face?"

"Oh, no, that's not it..."

Amethyst eyes met hers, and Alicia blushed, dropping her gaze as her heart skipped a beat. Every time their eyes met, she was reminded of when Clovis held her, and the memory was always embarrassing.

"Do you think Loid also colluded with Erdal in my previous life?" she asked instead, hoping to mask her emotions.

Clovis looked up at the sky for a long moment, his face serious.

"Probably. The duke was probably already communicating with Erdal long before Your Highness regained your memories. And, while our situation may not be fully identical to the one in your past life, there is a high chance of it nonetheless."

"I knew it..."

"And that isn't all... If I may speak of my suspicions?"

"Of course."

Alicia nodded without hesitation, causing Clovis to blink, surprised. His unguarded expression made him seem younger, and the princess giggled softly.

“I trust you, so you can speak freely,” she told him. “So, will you tell me what you’ve discovered?”

“...Seriously, you always catch me off guard.”

Clovis’s shapely brows furrowed in embarrassment. Then he explained his new thoughts on Alicia’s previous life as simply as possible.



“A reminder that this is all conjecture...” Clovis was cautious as he repeated his warning, but Alicia sensed that he believed in what he was about to say. “I believe the trigger that sparked the war between our two countries in Your Highness’s previous life was the accidental exposure of Lord Sutherland’s secret collusion with the Erdalian official.”

“It can’t be!” Alicia shook her head, shocked, but seeing the serious look on her adviser’s face, she calmed down and asked in a timid voice, “Is that true? Why do you think so?”

“Where should I begin...? What roused my suspicion was that the Erdalian official instructed the duke to prevent the establishment of the Mercurius Company.”

There were several possible reasons why the official would want to prevent the company’s establishment. For example, the establishment of the Mercurius company could put Erdal’s Ist Trading Company at a disadvantage. In addition, the economic growth of Heilland could increase its influence and power, closing the gap between the two countries.

At the very least, it was clear that the company would inconvenience Erdal. The fact that it could benefit Heilland was of no consideration to them.

“So when I heard Riddhe’s indictment, I thought the duke had completely betrayed Heilland to side fully with Erdal, but that wasn’t the case. The duke might have sold us out, but he did it intending to protect the kingdom. Maybe not the whole of Heilland, but certainly the Privy Council. However, he embodies our traditions and pride through the generations. If Erdal dissolved

the Privy Council, it would disrupt Heilland's order. He would have been worried that we would become vassals to Erdal."

"But something doesn't feel right." Alicia tilted her head to one side as she crossed her arms. "Loid claims to be worried about Heilland's future, but his every action has been detrimental to us. It almost seems like he's following the instructions of the Erdalian official mindlessly."

"And that is the issue." Clovis turned away from the bustling streets of Egdiel to look at Alicia. "Your Highness, what would have happened if the duke hadn't been exposed, and our proposal was rejected?"

Alicia glared up at the sky for a moment.

Loid had tried to prevent the establishment of the company as per instructions from the Erdalian official, but he must have realized that the Mercurius Company was an effective way to revitalize the kingdom's economy. Even his son, Riddhe, had reached that conclusion.

"...Hmm. He would have won the trust of the Erdalians but maybe be left with a sense of distrust towards them?"

"That's a good guess." Alicia turned her sky-blue eyes to see her adviser smile warmly at her. "This could have happened in Your Highness's previous life. The duke would inform the Erdalians of domestic politics, and the official would request the duke stop any plan that could disadvantage Erdal. This would go on, slowly fueling Lord Sutherland's distrust in the Erdalians."

He would wonder if the Erdalians were trustworthy after all. Would they keep their promise to protect the Privy Council once Fritz ascended to the throne? The accumulated distrust would gradually deteriorate their relationship. Soon, the Privy Council and Erdal would come to a head.

"Lord Sutherland is a heavyweight on the Privy Council, so the Erdalians must have thought that getting him on their side would win them the council's trust. But that was not the case. The duke would grow skeptical of accepting Prince Fritz as the heir to Heilland's throne, and the Privy Council would push back against Erdal."

It was anybody's guess if Empress Elizabeth was aware of the secret

communication between Loid and her subjects, but it wasn't hard to imagine how she would react to the Privy Council becoming more hostile towards her rule. And once Alicia and Fritz were of age, the voices of the Privy Council opposing their betrothal would become intolerable...

"And the empress would attack Heilland, defeat us, take control of the kingdom, and dissolve the Privy Council hindering her plans."

Clovis nodded at Alicia's intelligent prediction. He withheld his suspicion that the officials probably meant for the empress to go to war with Heilland. Given the difference in power, Erdal would obviously emerge victorious should war break out between the two countries. Nonetheless, currently, the empress was solely focused on domestic reform, not conquering Heilland.

That was why the official had worked to position the Privy Council against Erdal, hoping to rile the empress up...

"...That is only a possibility. The relationship between Lord Sutherland and the Erdalians might not have been the trigger; war could have broken out for an entirely different reason. In any case, we need to identify the official who colluded with the duke as soon as we can. His involvement with Erdal could have caused the war in Your Highness's previous life, so we should mark any Erdalian collaborators as persons of concern."

Alicia nodded with relief at Clovis's explanation.

"Now that Loid's crimes are exposed, we'll soon learn more about who he was working with. Judging by his actions during the meeting, I think he'll be honest with us."

"That would be for the best..."

However, Clovis's expression remained serious, as if he were still worried about something. Watching her adviser deep in thought, Alicia shrugged.

"It'll be okay. Things will work out for us. Everything's been going smoothly since I appointed you as my adviser, so I'm sure our luck will hold out."

"Isn't Your Highness being slightly too positive?"

"Is being positive wrong? Isn't it better than being too afraid to make a move?"

The future is surely bright for us. War won't break out, and Heilland will become an even more prosperous kingdom. Then, I'll succeed Father to become Heilland's next ruler. When that happens, you'll naturally..."

Be by my side.

The words never left her mind as her voice trailed off.

When they successfully changed the world and got a happy ending, would she and Clovis remain as they were now?

Clovis was serious and lawful. Even if she never told him about his deeds in her previous life, he would continue to serve her with everything he had, right? Besides, the distance between them had shrunk drastically after she shared the secret of her previous life with him.

Could that be it? If everything went well in the future, would she lose her connection to Clovis? Alicia suddenly felt insecure.

"Is something the matter? I will naturally what?"

Clovis tilted his head as he repeated her last words. Looking up at his handsome face, Alicia drew up her courage and continued.

"When everything ends well, and I become Heilland's next ruler, will you stay by my side?" Her mouth felt dry as she spoke. Her heart thundered in her chest.

A gentle breeze caressed her cheeks softly as her heart filled with anxiety and passion. A moment as long as eternity passed as Alicia's bright sky-blue eyes locked onto her adviser's.

Clovis's eyes widened. A beautiful smile blossomed on his face, like a flower bud opening its petals. Alicia's heart throbbed at the happiness in that smile.

"Of course. I will never leave Your Highness as long as you need me."

"Really? You won't leave me for anything?"

"No."

Clovis reached out a hand and gently caressed Alicia's soft cheek before a teasing smile pulled at his lips.

"I'm the one blessed to be allowed to stay by your side. It's a promise, so

don't forget it."

A sudden gust blew between them, and sunlight shone down like a stairway through a gap in the gray clouds, enveloping the two.

Her heart hurt.

Looking at Clovis's soft smile, she wondered why her chest felt so tight. Just the thought that he would stay by her side forever filled her entire body with indescribable joy.

"Your Highness?"

Clovis looked puzzled as Alicia remained silent. His low but gentle voice made her heart race even faster, and she almost got lost in those beautiful amethyst eyes. Finally, Alicia acknowledged the feelings hidden inside her.

...I think I love Clovis.

It was like a revelation that had descended with the sunlight. As soon as she became aware of it, a sweet pain ran through her body, and Alicia's face turned red as she looked down.

Wh-What a foolish thought!

Alicia shook her head forcefully, her sky-blue hair swaying with the action.

In her previous life, her infatuation with King Fritz had made her abandon her royal duty and led to her kingdom's ruin. Now, she promised the messenger of the stars to save the kingdom. She had no right to fall in love with anyone.

Clovis watched curiously as Alicia fought her internal battle, then gasped as if he had just realized something.

"Could it be exhaustion? This won't do; we need to summon the doctor—"

"N-No! That's not it!"

Alicia raised her head, stopping her overprotective adviser, but it only revealed her pink cheeks to Clovis. He blinked in confusion as Alicia hurried to explain herself.

"I'm feeling fine. This is just... Well..."

Her words trailed off. She didn't know how to explain or if her explanation

would only reveal more than she wanted. She floundered for the right words, her face aflame under Clovis's curious gaze.

No more! I need to escape!!

She couldn't do this any longer. Alicia decided to leap off the castle wall and dash away like a rabbit.

But before she could, a commotion within the castle stopped her train of thought. Alert, Clovis turned toward the corridor, where Robert and a few knights dashed onto the roof.

"Your Highness, Adviser Cromwell. Would you please come with me?"

Alicia realized that something serious had happened. A stern expression replaced Robert's usually friendly and informal demeanor.

Facing the princess and her adviser, the vice-captain of the knights of the Imperial Guard took a deep breath and spoke.

"Lord Sutherland has been attacked. The culprit has fled the scene and is at large. You are in danger here. Come, quickly...!"



"THIS is bad! Someone has broken into the dungeon and left Lord Sutherland and two soldiers seriously injured!"

"Someone snuck into the castle... They're still here! Close all the gates immediately!"

"The two soldiers are not in a life-threatening condition, but Lord Sutherland has been gravely injured...! Where are the medics?!"

"We've received reports that Hamill's squad has engaged a man near the west gate! The vice-captain is already on his way there. We must hurry!"

"Cornered by our Imperial Guard, the man killed himself. And Lord Sutherland... The medics have confirmed his death as well. How could this happen? We've lost our only lead to uncovering the Erdalian conspirators..."



WITH the death of Lord Sutherland, the treasonous saga involving the

kingdom's most prestigious house ended abruptly. The Imperial Guard examined the duke's body before being quietly handed over to the Sutherland family. With his secret ties to Erdal becoming public knowledge, they couldn't afford to hold a lavish funeral, and the event finished quietly and quickly.

The man who murdered Loid and committed suicide before the Imperial Guard remained unidentified, but from the timing of events, it was clear that the official colluding with Loid had sent the assassin to silence the duke.

With both men dead, there was no way to discover the identity of the mysterious Erdalian official. Even the oath uncovered by Riddhe and the Imperial Guard held no clues as to who Loid was colluding with.

Heiland was left reeling from the great loss. Everyone harbored anger in their hearts, feeling lost at having their pillar of strength, ally, or family member stolen from them.

But as time passed, people slowly moved on. Alicia was the only one stuck.

"Why?! Why did they resort to murder?!"

That was what she'd shouted at Clovis when he told her how difficult it would be to uncover the assassin's identity. Despite always having an answer ready for her, Clovis was strangely reticent that day.

Her adviser kept his eyes averted, lips pulled down into a frown. At that moment, Alicia understood that when he said it was difficult, what he meant was "close to impossible."

The image that surfaced in her mind was Riddhe, holding back his cries as he clung to Loid's cold, lifeless body.

He couldn't even take revenge.

The truth tore a hole in Alicia's heart.

When one confronts another, one has to be prepared for any consequence.

The smart princess understood that when she went up against the duke.

And that was why she headed into the second Privy Council meeting with such determination. She'd promised to bear the responsibility of changing the fates of Loid, Riddhe, and House Sutherland.

Yet this was the ending she had to accept.

Her head and body felt so heavy.

Her senses were dull as if stuck in a dream, and the sharp pain in her heart tormented her. If only it were all just a dream. Her mind was filled with such thoughts when Annie brought news of a visitor.



ALICIA had shut herself up in her room for the past few days.

While her physical condition was poor, it was also partly because she didn't feel like seeing anyone. Regretfully, she even rejected Clovis, who had come to ask after her countless times.

King James was the only one who could not be turned away. Even when she instructed her maids not to show anyone in, her father would waltz right in, an innocent look on his face. Perhaps her maids were working together and welcomed his presence.

"You look much better today."

However, King James's friendly, round face remained clouded as he looked at Alicia as she sat in bed. Alicia knew she looked terrible and silently averted her eyes.

King James usually visited Alicia's room several times a day, rambling on about what had happened after the incident. That was how she learned that the kingdom was deciding how to handle the Duchy of Sheraford now that Loid's funeral was over.

Her father must be so busy; Alicia knew how deeply concerned he must be to keep visiting her like this. She felt guilty about her own inability to move on.

"I'm sorry, Father. I—"

"Stop. There's nothing for you to apologize for, Cia."

"But..."

King James held up a finger, and Alicia fell silent. Looking at his troubled daughter, the king gently sat next to her.

“It’s all right, Cia. Let us talk today.”

“Father has been talking all this while.”

“Oh, of course. But let us speak more honestly today.”

Alicia tilted her head to one side, confused. King James smiled reassuringly at his daughter, then looked straight at Alicia with almond-colored eyes.

“Cia, as your father, I am proud of you. You possess a kind heart that cares for people and the courage and determination to face difficulties. That’s why you won’t be convinced even if I try to tell you that Loid’s death isn’t your fault.”

“...Yes.”

“The responsibility for Loid’s death in the castle is mine alone.”

That was what King James had told Alicia when she was first informed of the duke’s death. Even so, Alicia couldn’t help but wonder if things would have been different if she had not been present or if she had exposed Loid in a different way. She wanted things to change slightly so that this life would turn out differently from her previous one.

As if sensing Alicia’s thoughts, the king stroked her head with a soft, round hand and looked into her face again. “So I’ll say something different today... Cia, you said you want to succeed me as Heilland’s next ruler. If that ambition is true, should you continue to shut yourself away and mourn?”

“Well...”

Alicia’s face stiffened as her father hit a sore nerve, but the king shook his head slowly.

“You are still allowed that now, but there is so much you have to learn. No one is perfect from the beginning. You have to grow up little by little and take on the resolve of being a ruler.” Her father paused for a moment before continuing. “But when you become ruler, you cannot do this anymore. Even if there is heartbreaking grief, even if we regret our actions and despair, we have citizens to protect. As we weep for the dead, we also have a duty to devote ourselves to the living.”

“...Even when someone loses their life because of you?”

“Of course.”

Alicia was at a loss for words at her father’s brief reply. Finally, large drops of tears fell from her big, sky-blue eyes. Her father gently wrapped a warm hand around hers as she shed quiet tears.

“I’m sorry, Cia. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just want you to know what it means to be a ruler and to think about it. What do you want to do now?”

“I...”

The more her tears fell, the more Alicia regained her composure. She thought hard about her father’s words, asking herself again why she was given the chance to live her life over.

“I won’t run away.” Alicia’s answer was firm even as tears swam in her eyes. “I want to become stronger, Father. I want the strength to protect everyone. The Erdalian colluding with Loid may try to harm Heilland again... And I won’t let that happen!”

Even if they couldn’t take revenge now.

Even if the only revenge was to do her best to protect the people important to her and achieve the desired future.

“It’s a tough road. You can give your best, but as long as the enemy is more powerful, the same tragedy may very well occur again. Still, you must know you can’t run away from responsibility.”

“I know... If I run away, I lose my chance to fight.”

“...That troubling stubbornness of yours is just like someone I know.”

King James reached out a hand to muss Alicia’s hair, and she was too busy protesting to notice the pained smile on her father’s face.

After they had calmed down, Alicia asked for a favor from her father.



THE breeze gently blew through her hair before dispersing into the sky.

The entrance to the dungeon was right next to the barracks. A remnant from when Egdiel Castle served as a military base, it was seldom used now. Even so,

the grass around the stone entrance was neatly mowed. The white flowers left by the side of the entrance were new. Alicia held a white lily as she watched the petals flutter in the wind.

Loid's funeral concluded quietly after his body was handed over to House Sutherland. Since he was denounced as a criminal right before his death, he supposedly hadn't been buried in House Sutherland's family grave.

Due to this, Alicia and the other nobles of the Privy Council had nowhere to go to mourn his death. Instead, flowers were offered at the place where the assassin had taken Loid's life.

Crouching down, Alicia laid her lily next to the others, then closed her eyes and clasped her hands together.

The king who escorted Alicia here at her request watched from a distance as his daughter offered a silent prayer. Then he turned around as if noticing something, his round face breaking into a smile.

"Your Highness!!"

A familiar voice broke the silence as Alicia stood and turned around, catching sight of a breathless Clovis.

"Thank you for coming out here, Clovis. You must be busy."

"Y-Your Majesty!"

It seemed Clovis was unaware of the king's presence until he called out to him. The young adviser bowed his head, but the king smiled and waved his hand.

"It's all right. Now that you're here, I can take my leave. I'll leave Cia to you." Alicia's father threw her a wink, and she understood that he had sent for Clovis to meet them here.

As the king took his leave, Alicia and Clovis stood face-to-face before the dungeon.

Perhaps it was because they hadn't met in a while, but Clovis seemed at a loss for what to say to his mistress. Seeing his hesitant gaze, Alicia realized that this was the longest time they'd spent apart since Clovis became her adviser.

She noticed his lightly mussed jet-black hair and heaving shoulders as he caught his breath. She could imagine him dashing here from the advisory office after receiving word from King James.

“Um!!”

“Well—”

They started simultaneously, hesitated, and fell silent. Then Clovis gestured for Alicia to speak first.

“Sorry for making you worry. I knew you came to visit many times, but I turned you away.”

“It’s all right.”

As expected, Clovis shook his head firmly at her apology. Then he stepped forward until he stood before her, kneeling and looking up at Alicia with concern.

“It’s all right. It doesn’t matter now.”

Seeing those beautiful violet eyes up close made something in Alicia’s chest burn. She liked him and had been aware of that from the moment before Loid’s assassination. Alicia closed her eyes, softly putting a lid on the sweet feelings swelling inside her for this young man who believed in and supported her so much.

The messenger of the stars had granted Alicia her second life to secure the future of Heiland. And until that was accomplished... Or at least until the enemies who took Loid’s life and threatened Heiland were exposed, she had no time for romance.

When she opened her eyes, she looked straight at her adviser with an intelligent gaze. “I’ve woken up now. Even if I cry and feel pessimistic, the world won’t change. It’s strange, isn’t it? I should have known it when I was given this second chance at life.”

“...Your Highness.”

“Only the living can clear the regrets of the dead.”

It sounded like she had taken the lesson to heart.

Her sky-blue hair flowed gently in the wind, but the sorrowful, mature expression on her face sent a sharp pain through Clovis's chest. Even as she denounced his crimes before the Privy Council, Alicia still believed in the goodness in Loid's heart. She had hoped for the man to reveal the truth in the short life he had left to atone for his sins.

Despite being a traitor and criminal, she did not give up on him, so it wasn't hard to imagine the pain this kindhearted girl felt when Loid's life was taken forcefully. But no matter how much Clovis worried about her and wanted to protect her from hardship, Alicia would turn it all down.

He'd known it the moment he saw his mistress standing before the dungeon. No, before that, when King James sent for him. When she left the room after locking herself up for days, she was ready to stand up and fight again.

...In that case, he would indulge her.

Would she want that?

"Your Highness is right." Finally, Clovis stood back up and bowed, hand on his heart. "You have a duty to fulfill. There is no time for you to stop, even to mourn the future of our kingdom."

"That is harsh... But I'm glad to hear it." The tiny smile on Alicia's face was as bright as the spring sky. "I have a request. Could you prepare a carriage to bring us to the Sutherland Mansion first thing tomorrow?"

"Is Your Highness planning to see Riddhe?"

"Yes."

Alicia nodded with determination, the depression that had kept her down for days gone like an illusion.

"Let's speak with Riddhe and settle this."



THE next day, Alicia made her way to the Sutherland Mansion in Egdiel, accompanied by Clovis and various knights.

Riddhe and a few servants, including young Albert, who had worked hard with them on the indictment, welcomed them at the door. Despite being a large and

splendid mansion, there was no sign of much activity. The place seemed empty.

“I sent everyone else back to the duchy with Mother and my brothers,” was Riddhe’s simple response.

After the quiet conclusion of Loid’s funeral, only Riddhe and a few choice servants stayed in the capital to await the Crown’s instructions. Since the household might be abolished, they would be looking for places that would take in their servants.

After leading Alicia’s party into the reception room, Riddhe sat down across from them, his expression tight. Not knowing where to start, Alicia decided to comment on it.

“Did you not think we would come?”

“No...” Riddhe admitted, looking at the princess and her adviser incomprehensibly. His face looked gaunter than she remembered, and Alicia averted her eyes.

“About Father, I’m really... Well...”

“Please stop. There’s no need to apologize,” Alicia said.

Riddhe frowned as if holding back some emotion. “When I decided to indict Father, I thought I was ready for him to be executed. Even with the assassination, I don’t think I made a mistake... It was my duty to stop him, no matter the outcome.”

“Riddhe...”

“But I cannot forgive the cowards who tricked my father, then simply killed him off.”

At that moment, Alicia saw the rage burning in Riddhe’s eyes. His anger was fully justified. The assassins had robbed his father of his only chance to reveal the truth and atone for his sins. Because she understood his regret and anger, she had to get through to him. Steeling her frightened heart, Alicia opened her mouth to speak.

“The kingdom will no longer be officially pursuing the matter of Loid’s collusion with the Erdalian official.”

Riddhe's eyes widened, and he tried to speak but was at a loss for words. After a couple of unsuccessful attempts, his shoulders slumped.

"I had a vague feeling this would happen. We have no proof the one who killed Father is an Erdalian; any wrong move on our part will worsen the relationship between us."

"Yes, and war may even break out. Unfortunately, we have no chance of winning should that happen right now."

"...And that's why that assassin didn't even hesitate to kill Father... Dammit!" Riddhe cursed in frustration, biting harshly on his lip.

Alicia and Clovis looked at each other and nodded. It was finally time to get to the main goal of their visit.

"Riddhe, I am here to tell you that the fate of House Sutherland has been decided."

"And...?"

Riddhe's eyes were wide as he looked at Alicia, then Clovis. Despite his efforts to stay calm, his voice trembled slightly. Was the most prosperous house in the kingdom about to be abolished?

"What should I do now? I guess I need to go to the castle and receive further instructions from the Privy Council."

"Yes, that will be the official procedure," Alicia confirmed, her bright sky-blue eyes looking straight at Riddhe. "But I want you to listen closely now and make your own decision going forward."

Riddhe frowned in confusion. After all, the head of the house had committed the grave sin of colluding with their neighboring country. Riddhe would have no choice but to humbly accept whatever punishment was given, no matter how cruel.

So what was this innocent princess thinking? Utterly confused, Riddhe watched as Clovis pulled out a letter from his pocket and handed it to Alicia. Perhaps the document contained the fate of House Sutherland. Riddhe's body tensed as Alicia read the letter aloud.

“For leaking state secrets to a neighboring country, the late Loid Sutherland will be stripped of all titles, including dukedom, and his house will be expelled from the Privy Council.”

Letting out a long exhale, Riddhe closed his eyes. It was a fair sentence for the crime, and the fact that House Sutherland was allowed to keep their name was a kindness. However, it was still a sad end to House Sutherland’s glory as a prestigious family that had supported the Crown since Heilland’s founding.

Riddhe bowed his head.

“...And that’s all for Loid’s charges. Next, in honor of his achievement in exposing the traitor, Riddhe Sutherland will be bestowed the following title...”

“W-Wait a minute.” Riddhe stood up, unwittingly interrupting the princess’s words. “My achievement? Did you say achievement?”

“Yes. Without you, we wouldn’t have been able to uncover Loid’s plot. That is something to be commended.”

“But I can’t.” Riddhe shook his head vehemently, his expression tense. However, Alicia had expected as much and kept her gaze strong. “I am the heir of House Sutherland. I am to shoulder Father’s sins and take the fall with him.”

“I know that, but you are also obliged to accept this reward.”

“If it came at the price of selling Father out, then I don’t want it!!”

“Father... Please forgive me...!”

Riddhe’s broken voice as he clung to Loid’s corpse echoed in Alicia’s mind, the heartbreaking scream piercing her heart. It was easy to imagine how painful it was for Riddhe to be rewarded for his part in the incident.

Even so...

“The northwestern section of the former Duchy of Sheraford, including Armas, will be delegated to the neighboring Duchy of Geras. The remaining areas will be placed under the jurisdiction of the district council as territories of the Crown. And as a reward for his achievements, Riddhe Sutherland shall be appointed as a member of said district council, as branch chief of Sheraford.”

Alicia’s piercing sky-blue gaze landed on Riddhe as she finished reading.

“That is King James’s strong recommendation, which the Privy Council has unanimously agreed with.”

“His Majesty’s...?”

Riddhe’s gaze swam as he looked to Clovis for confirmation. He used to consider the adviser his ultimate rival, but perhaps his perspective was also changing. Clovis himself seemed surprised but quickly recovered his composure.

“Initially, His Majesty had wanted to bestow on you the title of Duke of Sheraford.”

“What...? That’s impossible!”

“It’s true, but that would seem unfair to the other nobles of the Privy Council. That’s why he gave you the title of district council branch chief instead. Even if you no longer hold titles or territories, your role in protecting our borders against Erdal is still important.”

“But what on earth is His Majesty thinking?” Riddhe shook his head, confused, as he sank into the sofa. “I’d fully understand if he kicked me out of national politics considering what Father did. But to be entrusted with key territories with connections to Erdal...”

“That is proof His Majesty sees your recent actions as noble and has high expectations of you becoming a key member of Heiland’s future.”

Alicia nodded with determination at Clovis’s words.

Not even the magnanimous King James would do this if he simply wanted to reward Riddhe. Everyone present during that meeting, including King James, the Privy Council, and maybe even the indicted Loid himself, acknowledged Riddhe. It would be a waste to condemn the young man who stood up courageously and did the right thing as the heir of House Sutherland.

“I would like your support,” Alicia repeated the words she’d said to Riddhe when they met at the Eram River. “You said you needed my help to indict your father, and we moved the kingdom to do that. Won’t you repay the favor?”

Silence ruled the Sutherland Mansion. Looking at Alicia, Riddhe suddenly remembered his father’s last words.

"I am sorry, and... You did well."

Loid had left him those words with a small smile as if finally freed from the contradiction of betraying Heilland for its sake.

But maybe that was not all there was to it. Loid, who knew King James and the Privy Council intimately, probably predicted they would give Riddhe an important role after the incident. If that was the case, Loid had entrusted Heilland's future to him with a father's proud smile.

"Shall we give you a minute?"

"No worries. You're just imagining things."

Roughly wiping away the tears sliding down his cheeks, Riddhe turned to face Alicia again. There was no longer any hesitation in his gaze, only a blazing light. Then he stood up and knelt before her, his actions reminiscent of his father's.

"Please tell His Majesty that I, Riddhe Sutherland, will do my best to live up to his expectations."

"...I'm so happy to hear that."

A warmth welled up in Alicia's chest as she held out her small hand, a lovely smile blooming on her face like a flower. Riddhe's eyes were wide as he received the full force of the princess's happiness.

"I'll be counting on you too, Riddhe. Let us work hard together."

"Your Highness..."

Riddhe blushed as his gaze switched between Alicia's face and hand. Finally, he lifted his hand timidly to grasp Alicia's...

But not before Clovis, who had been watching silently from the side, cut in and took Riddhe's hand smoothly in his own.

"What's wrong, Clovis?"

"Wh-What? Did you want to shake hands with me, too?"

Clovis just smiled sweetly as Alicia and Riddhe stared at him, confused.



“...How should I say this? Maybe I just want to tease you a little?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

“I am glad to have you as an ally, and it is reassuring that we will be working together for Heilland’s future... But, that aside, I do not wish to see you shake hands with my dear mistress.”

Clovis’s smile was perfect, despite Riddhe’s utter confusion.

“I mean, *so much* has happened between you and me.”

His smile turned cheeky, and for a moment, Riddhe stared with his mouth agape. Then, his face turned red as if on fire.

“Damn you!! Are you trying to pick a fight?!”

“Me? Pick a fight? What do you mean? You’ve always been the one to instigate things, even during our inspection mission in Erdal.”

“I’m not gonna apologize!! I still hate you, you know! Always overshadowing me in that calm way of yours. You’re the one who should apologize, Cromwell! Until then, I’m not gonna even acknowledge you for a second!”

“I don’t understand what you mean. Also, unfortunately, I don’t really like you, either.”

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?!”

Alicia stared wide-eyed as the two young men started a heated battle.

But just as she was about to step in, she realized that Clovis seemed to be enjoying the quarrel. Perhaps this was her adviser’s small chance at revenge after being on the receiving end of Riddhe’s antics for so long. And now, since Riddhe was too embarrassed to offer a spoken apology, he was gladly playing along.

The situation felt sillier to Alicia with each passing moment, and she soon broke out in giggles. And that was the puzzling spectacle that greeted Albert, who rushed over at the sound of the commotion; two young men engaged in a heated verbal battle and a laughing princess.

The oppressive atmosphere hanging over the mansion dissipated, and Alicia and Riddhe finally shook hands, sunlight streaming in through the windows.

It was, without a doubt, Princess Alicia's first step into a new era.

4. And the Gears Begin to Turn

STANDING atop a vast hill that stretched endlessly, a boy looked up at the countless stars sparkling in the deep blue sky. His hair, skin, and lashes were fair and light, giving him a mysterious, translucent beauty that hinted at his otherworldly nature. However, nobody was around to see him, and the boy didn't seem to care that he was alone.

A long time ago, which was only a short period in the boy's lifespan, he'd made a pact with a human king. Since then, he had been referred to as the "Guardian Star" by the king's people.

"Hehe, I picked a wonderful princess indeed."

The image reflected in those eyes, framed by platinum-blond lashes as they gazed up at the sky, was not of the shining stars but of a young girl.

Alicia. A bright princess with eyes as blue as the clear spring sky. The one entrusted with Heiland's future in her second life.

The messenger of the stars smiled, satisfied.

As a royal, Alicia had always been a little too honest, and it had caused her downfall in her first life, when she drowned in her love for King Fritz, losing sight of everything else. But look how reliable she was now. Entrusted with a tough destiny, she'd run into obstacles again and again, tasting failure and frustration. Even so, she stood back up each time, taking small steps forward.

Her small body was finally starting to turn the gears of history.

The boy's eyes narrowed as he reached up to the night sky as if trying to grasp something.

"Oh, Alicia. You are amazing. Much more than I expected! But..." The boy swallowed his next words. He had put this too-heavy responsibility on a young girl who hadn't lived long. And now, he could only watch, unable to lift the burden from her.

Not that the strong-willed Alicia would wish for any intervention.

Closing his eyes, the boy spoke calmly again. "...But someday, you'll meet a larger gear that is moving this world's destiny. And beyond that lies your new future."

With a final whisper, the boy turned his beautiful gaze to the distant sky again...



THE light from the candles placed neatly along the walls reflected off the glittering gold furnishings in the hall, decorated by a single red carpet stretching through its center. Just a little while ago, the space was flooded with people coming and going, and guards posted along both sides of the hall watched silently. Now, the people and guards were gone, leaving a single woman sitting slumped on the throne as the only person present.

She was exhausted after a series of audiences with her people. Pressing a hand adorned with rings decorated with large gems to her temple, she leaned back and stared listlessly into space.

There was no one in this era who did not know her name.

Those who had never seen her in person might not recognize her immediately, but a second look at her cold beauty, wavy hair the color of the scorching sun, and majestic presence that inspired awe in all who saw her, would render her instantly recognizable.

She was Elizabeth, the fierce empress who ruled over Erdal.

The door to the audience hall opened, and a shadowy man slipped in. Despite the eerie atmosphere of the empty hall, the man showed no signs of fear, walking up to the empress and stopping by her side as if he had done this countless times.

"You look tired, my mistress."

"...Then why are you still bothering me, Yggdrasil?"

The man named Yggdrasil returned the empress's sardonic smile. He knew his mistress would have summoned him had he not come. With that mutual

understanding, the empress turned her cold gaze toward the man.

“I’m sure you have heard the news as well.”

“Are we speaking of the rumors concerning our neighbor Heilland?”

“Was there something else of concern?” the empress retorted in a bored tone, her brow furrowed.

Anyone else would have been terrified at her response, fearing they had somehow offended the empress. But Eric Yggdrasil was not just anyone. As the empire’s chancellor, he was used to such exchanges with his mistress. His weary, thin face remained calm, like the surface of a pool, as he waited for the empress to continue.

“Loid Sutherland, the Duke of Sheraford, which borders our land, has passed away suddenly. And a strange rumor has been circulating that he was assassinated because he was colluding secretly with someone on our side.”

“It’s a silly rumor, not something Your Majesty should be worried about.”

“Ha, silly? Do you really think it is just a baseless rumor?” The empress’s red lips lifted in a smile as she watched her chancellor in amusement, her piercing eyes silently looking into his heart.

Yggdrasil didn’t reply, waiting for the empress to speak again. A tense mood settled between the two, and the only movement in the hall was the flickering of the candlelight.

Finally, the empress’s gaze shifted away from the chancellor, as if she had lost interest in him. Her hands came to rest on the luxurious armrests of her throne. “It doesn’t matter. Either way, my cousin won’t say anything. He won’t want to stir up any trouble between our countries. Let us disregard the rumors.”

“As you wish.”

The chancellor bowed his head as the empress waved her ringed hand, dismissing the man. However, she spoke up again just as Yggdrasil was turning to leave.

“Our neighbor is working to establish a wide-area trading company, and the idea was proposed by their princess.”

“...That is what I’ve heard.”

“She is only ten but so reliable. I’m more intent on making her Fritz’s consort now.” The empress’s fierce gaze shimmered in the flickering candlelight as she smiled. Her imposing figure intimidated even the long-serving chancellor. Slowly, her smile widened. “Tell the Senate that Heilland is to be allowed to trade freely in our empire. That should give the Ist Trading Company something to worry about.”

“Bu—”

“What? Are you opposed to it?” the empress asked, amused, as she stood up from her throne. “It’s hard to believe that a young child came up with such a brilliant idea. Besides, Heilland and Erdal are friends with a unique relationship. This will create a debt in our favor, won’t it?”

“But, mistress, the company will deal mainly in high-quality crafted goods from Heilland. Our neighbor may be old-fashioned in their ways, but I think the new company will eventually grow in influence and power.”

“And what about it?” The empress brought her face close to her chancellor’s ear, whispering with a charming smile. “With one more business rival to rock the boat, Ist Trading Company will become obsolete. Then, we can destroy it and build something new.”

“Your Majesty, that is—”

“A joke. Don’t mind me. The people of Erdal aren’t that weak... But make sure word gets to the ‘insider’ that I have no intention of waging war against Heilland. And nothing will change my mind.”

“...Understood,” Yggdrasil murmured, eyes downcast.

However, the empress had already pulled away and sank back onto her throne, her attention elsewhere. After bowing to the brooding and beautiful, yet terrifying, woman, the chancellor left the audience hall.



THE gears of history, interlinked, started to turn again.

And the small gear, known as Alicia...



“WELL, well. Welcome, Princess Alicia!! And Clo, too!”

“It’s been a while, Jude. I’m glad to see you’re well.”

Alicia smiled at the sight of the handsome marquis welcoming them with open arms as Clovis led her down from her carriage by the hand.

A few months had passed since their encounter with the Privy Council, and Jude had gathered more merchants to join their endeavor, and the Mercurius Company was finally taking shape. Excited, Alicia visited the Marquisate of Rozen again.

After greeting Jude’s wife, they were ushered into the mansion.

“The company’s headquarters will be set up in Held, right?” Clovis asked.

“Yes. I’ll take you there this afternoon. Oh! I can finally show Princess Alicia my beloved town of Held.”

“Yes. Thanks to your stories, I’m looking forward to visiting the town.”

The princess couldn’t hide her excitement at the marquis’s animated voice. Clovis smiled wryly as he walked behind them.

Jude stopped in front of a door and turned around with an innocent smile. “Here we are. Now, one, two, three...!”

“Welcome, Your Highness Princess Alicia!!”

Jude pushed the door open enthusiastically; a chorus of voices rang out. A long table was in the middle of a room bathed in bright sunlight. A row of suntanned merchants were seated along each side, and everyone turned towards Alicia and her party with welcoming smiles. These men had agreed to help Jude set up the Mercurius Company. At Alicia’s request, the marquis had gathered everyone for a meeting that day.

“I am ever so pleased to have the opportunity to meet with you. I am Alicia. Thank you for taking time off your busy schedules to be here today. I look forward to working with all of you.”

The merchants sighed collectively in awe as Alicia bowed her head.

“Wow! It’s really Princess Alicia herself.”

“Whoa. She’s so small and cute.”

“Idiot! That’s no way to speak of Her Royal Highness.”

“Are we going to be famous now that we’ve met Her Royal Highness?”

The room rang with laughter at the ecstatic exclamations. Alicia nodded happily as she looked at everyone with sparkling eyes.

“I don’t see why not. I believe the Mercurius Company is indispensable to securing Heilland’s future, and I can feel the spirit and pride in everyone’s hearts.” Smiling at the attentive merchants, she continued, “Thank you for gathering for the Mercurius Company and our kingdom’s future. Let us be guided by our guardian star!”

Cheers and spontaneous applause broke out, and Alicia blushed with a shy smile.



CLOVIS smiled quietly next to the princess, thrilled by the positive reception. With just a short greeting, Alicia had wormed her way into the merchants’ hearts. The coming meal would raise morale and solidify their determination to work hard for the company.

The adviser cast his gaze around the table again. Before this, it would have been unheard of to have the kingdom’s princess sit at the same table as a merchant, but Alicia had bridged that gap without trouble. It was like a glimpse of the future they wished for Heilland, where the royal family and citizens supported each other.

Clovis’s heart raced. A sense of longing swelled in his chest, and his shapely lips curved into a smile.

Now, Your Highness, what will you do next?

The road ahead would not be smooth sailing and could be full of pain and danger. But she believed that a new future would be created, and she moved forward one step at a time.

“You look happy, Clovis,” Alicia, seated next to him with a glass in hand,

whispered. Her smile was carefree, indicating she already felt right at home.

“I am.” Clovis smiled as he followed his mistress and picked up his glass. “I got a little carried away thinking about the future.”

“Oh, so Clovis can daydream, too.”

The two shared a small smile as Jude raised his voice to call out a toast.

Then, everyone raised their glasses high, wishing for the best future for Heiland and the Mercurius Company.

5. The Flower Blooming at the Ball

*“**CHANGE** the future, Alicia; that is the pact between you and me.”*

The familiar voice echoed through the darkness. Streaks of light shone from far below, streaming upward like shooting stars.

Upwards? Was it right to say that?

No sky or land was there, and she didn't know which direction she was facing or if she was even standing upright.

Then a small wooden cylinder appeared before her.

“Look at this. See how easily the world changes depending on how you look at it?”

She reached out to grab the spinning wooden cylinder. It seemed to be right in front of her, yet also terribly far away at the same time. Suddenly, the cylinder stopped spinning, and she realized it was lying on the cold floor. As she moved towards it, she noticed someone collapsed next to it.

The body faded in and out of the darkness as the streaks of light flowed past, and then, she was also lying on the cold floor. She lay facing someone with the wooden cylinder between them, but not recognizing their face or clothes. But the helpless hand reaching out seemed oddly familiar.

That white, translucent skin was just so beautiful...



PRINCESS Alicia awoke as her consciousness emerged from the darkness, her long lashes trembling. Her beautiful sky-blue hair tumbled down to her waist when she sat up in bed. Gazing absentmindedly at the light leaking through the gap in her curtains, the princess ran her pale fingers across her faintly pink lips.

She dreamed of something before she woke up, but the image vanished the moment she opened her eyes, leaving only sadness in her heart.

“Are you awake, Your Highness?”

Lady Fourier’s voice rang out from the other side of the wooden door. With Alicia’s permission, the door opened, revealing the chief lady-in-waiting, two court ladies, and Alicia’s maids, Annie and Martha.

“Good morning, Your Highness. How are you feeling?”

“Great. You look happy today as well, Lady Fourier.”

“We have an important event today, so we are going all out.” Lady Fourier nodded seriously as she pointed to the basins and dress brought in by the maids. After six years, a touch of grey had snuck into her hair.

Six years had passed since Alicia had regained memories of her previous life.

Alicia slid her slender legs to the floor. The princess had grown up well over the past six years. Her well-proportioned and lithe figure was fresh as a sapling; her lovely face slowly lost its girlishness to take on an adult’s look.

She was the blooming Blue Rose Princess of Heilland. Her radiant beauty deserved that title, but the princess remained friendly as she spread her arms.

“All right.”

Alicia looked at everyone with her big, bright sky-blue eyes that hadn’t changed through the years, and smiled.

“I’ll do my best today too!”



AS the maids pattered about the room, Alicia stared at her grown-up reflection in the mirror and thought hard.

I have to change the future, but how much time do I have left to do so...?

Six years ago, Alicia and her adviser Clovis won a fierce battle against the opposition and established the Mercurius Company, Heilland’s first wide-area trading company. Jude Nicol, the Marquis of Rozen, gathered discerning merchants to promote the trade of Heilland’s high-quality crafts, gaining the attention of their kingdom’s neighbors.

The company’s reputation had increased quite a bit, counting influential

nobles, wealthy merchants, and even the royal families of small kingdoms among its customers. In addition, Heilland's artisanal culture, which had been on the verge of being overshadowed, was revived and reentered its golden age.

Their relationship with Erdal had also seen some changes.

Using memories of her previous life as a guide, Alicia sought to prevent war from breaking out between their countries. At the same time, she tasked Clovis with strengthening Heilland's border defenses, just in case.

The man in charge of overseeing this vital task was none other than Riddhe Sutherland, District Council Branch Chief of Sheraford. The area, which used to be part of the territory of the Duchy of Sheraford, received stockpiles of food and weapons from the Southern Knight Division under the instruction of Robert von Belt.

Since Sheraford was under Chief Riddhe's direct control, the process was speedy. House Sutherland's private army, stockpiles, and network of merchants and farmers provided weapons and food at great prices. Furthermore, Riddhe also approached the Duke of Geras, the neighboring territory that, like Sheraford, shared borders with Erdal, to suggest that House Hobbs and the Order of Knights work together to strengthen border defenses there too.

Thanks to his remarkable work, several fortresses guarding the borders were able to gather enough supplies to survive an invasion and besiege should their neighbor attack.

And that wasn't even counting the amount of work Clovis had put in.

With the rapid progress of the new company, the strengthening of border defenses, and the success of its policies, the nobles came to recognize Princess Alicia as the right choice to inherit the throne. The nobles of the Privy Council, who formed an outstanding relationship with the princess over time, especially supported her.

It was a well-known fact that behind the glorious princess was an adviser who pledged sole allegiance and supported her with unparalleled skill. As such, Clovis's position and reliability as an adviser had become rock solid, even though he was still a young man in his mid-twenties. There were even rumors he would one day succeed Nigel Otto as Chief Adviser.

He was no longer frowned upon for being “Graham’s cursed blood.”

Princess Alicia, with her flowing blue hair and radiant dignity, and Clovis, the handsome adviser always by her side. In the eyes of the people of Heilland, the pair’s grand success represented hope for the future. But the attention on them was no longer coming from just within Heilland.



ALICIA, fully decked out by Lady Fourier and the others, was heading to the great hall where the event would be. With her shining hair beautifully braided and slender limbs clad in a light blue dress that shimmered white, Alicia was as beautiful as the moon spirit from the fairy tales. Despite this, the princess was frowning at being adorned from head to toe.

“I can get changed with just the help of you and Martha. There’s no need for Lady Fourier to come,” she had complained to Annie.

Alicia liked Lady Fourier, for she was always just and fair, even if her lack of facial expressions had earned her the nickname Iron Mask. That said, the chief lady-in-waiting was also a tough teacher who nagged at Alicia constantly about posture and decorum, leaving her tired after every changing session.

Annie just laughed. “Don’t deprive the chief lady-in-waiting of her purpose in life. She has always dreamed of Your Highness becoming a splendid princess worthy of Heilland’s royal family. Depriving her of that joy when her dream has finally come true would be mean.”

That was why Alicia had entrusted herself to Lady Fourier today. Despite her exhaustion, she learned a lot from the chief lady-in-waiting about how to behave in public and was grateful for her varied guidance.

As they reached the front of a set of doubly fortified doors guarded by two knights, Lady Fourier checked over the princess from head to toe.

“Your hairstyle...is still fixed. Tuck your chin in, straighten your spine, there. Elegant down to your fingertips. Remember, Your Highness, you are the center of attention.”

“Yes, yes, I’ve got it. I am the mirror that reflects Heilland’s culture and history, right?”

“Good that you remember.”

Lady Fourier nodded seriously as Alicia recited her pet phrase, but a satisfied smile was on her face instead of her usual stoic expression. With a final tug on Alicia’s dress, Lady Fourier signaled to the knights guarding the door.

Stand tall. I am the Blue Rose of Heilland.

The guards pulled the door open, and Alicia stepped into the magnificent hall, ready to receive the guests.



IT was no wonder why Lady Fourier was excited. A ceremony was being held at Egdiel Castle to celebrate the birthday of James, King of Heilland and Alicia’s father.

The castle was decorated gorgeously to welcome Heilland’s nobles and royal families from other countries. The women, in particular, were all dressed elegantly, and even Alicia, who was never that interested in fashion (much to Lady Fourier’s chagrin), was thrilled at the sight.

Moving to stand next to King James, Alicia socialized with the guests who came forward to greet them. The principality of Wargs, the kingdom of Reinsus, the kingdom of Ostre, and the list went on. Despite being more well-versed in each country’s monarchy than when she was little, Alicia’s head still swam with the sheer number of people she had to greet.

At least she was with her father, the cheeky King James.

“The king of Wargs may look tough, but he’s deathly afraid of ghosts.”

“The lamb from Reinsus is delicious. Or so I heard.”

“It’s said that the king of Ostre fell in love with his queen at first sight and won her heart with a love song. Now that’s true romance.”

The king would whisper such tidbits in her ear every time they met someone new, and the quirky information helped Alicia memorize and recognize most of the guests quickly. The years hadn’t diminished King James’s mischievous nature one bit.

Suddenly, a small commotion broke out in the hall.

“Oh, they must have arrived.”

King James turned toward the main door, his round face beaming with joy. Alicia turned to look as well, just in time to see a couple approaching them.

The well-built man was Jeremy Crowne, Erdal’s foreign affairs minister. But the one who captured everyone’s attention wasn’t Jeremy, but Beatrix Crowne, the lady walking gracefully by his side.

Beatrix, the youngest sister of Erdal’s former emperor and thus King James’s aunt, was already in her mid-fifties, but she was still beautiful. Her presence held political clout, even more so than that of her husband, for Beatrix was the one who favored Elizabeth and persuaded her father to make her heir to the throne. Thus, even the all-powerful Elizabeth respected Beatrix; the latter was the only person in Erdal who held the empress’s complete trust. The fact that Beatrix was here today proved Elizabeth regarded their countries’ ties highly.

Elizabeth seldom visited other countries. She was a busy woman, of course, but it was also because Erdal was that much more powerful than any other kingdom.

King James smiled and welcomed the Crownes as they stepped forward. “Dear aunt. I’m glad that you’re doing well.”

“It’s been a while, Your Majesty. Thank you for inviting me.”

King James drew back in mock affront. “Please stop. Mother will get mad at me if I allow you to be so formal.”

Beatrix let out a teasing smile, sweet like a young girl despite her age. Then her gaze turned to Alicia. “Oh, Your Highness. You’re becoming more and more beautiful by the day. It’s as if I’m looking at Lisbeth.”

“Long time no see, Lady Beatrix. Thank you very much for coming to Egdiel.”

“My sister is here in Heilland, with my dear nephew and his daughter. It may be a little far, but it was an enjoyable journey.” Beatrix smiled meaningfully. Before Alicia could understand what was happening, Beatrix’s attention was already back on King James. “Oh, yes,” she added in an innocent voice. “Is my dear sister here? I’d love to say hello.”

“Of course. Mother is looking forward to seeing you too.”

The king immediately called on Nigel Otto—who was standing behind him—and instructed the chief adviser to lead the Crownes to the former king and queen.

“See you, Your Majesty... Your Highness, let’s speak again later.” With another meaningful smile at Alicia, the Crownes followed the chief adviser. For some reason, Beatrix’s beautiful smile made the princess’s heart race in a strange manner.



WITH the departure of the Crownes, their socializing was complete. Alicia took a deep breath as King James turned to her with a smile.

“Good job, Cia. You socialized really well as a princess.”

“It’s all thanks to Lady Fourier’s guidance.”

Lady Fourier stood a little apart from them, but her face, though expressionless, somehow spoke of her approval of Alicia’s performance.

Alicia relaxed, and King James stretched before taking a look around.

“After this, there will be a luncheon party, a garden party, a parade by the marching band, and greetings to the citizens. I wonder what the other countries would like to talk to us about... But I’m sure they’re all here for you this time, Cia.”

“Whyever is that?”

“Haven’t you noticed? Everyone is here today with a young prince around your age. The prince of Reinsus even turned bright red when he caught sight of you.”

“I-Is that so?”

King James nodded enthusiastically, despite Alicia’s flustered response. “With Aunt Beatrix here, no kingdom is going to dare to bring up marriage and risk Erdal’s displeasure. But things will be different if you fall in love. That’s why everyone brought their princes along today.”

The king's outrageous words stunned Alicia as she gazed around the hall. Now that her father mentioned it, she sensed the gazes of the foreign princes on her—some passionate, others more subdued but still interested.

If only I could go back to my room...

Alicia looked up at the ceiling and prayed.

It was a well-known fact that the empress of Erdal wanted Alicia as a consort for her son. As a result, no one, whether in Heilland or otherwise, dared ask for Alicia's hand in marriage, fearing the empress's wrath.

That was why Alicia was still not betrothed, despite her shining beauty and perfect age. That said, she was a wise princess known for her foresight and rumored to be the next ruler of Heilland. Even with their hands tied, every country fervently hoped she would fall for their prince.

Alicia, on the other hand, was reluctant to marry anyone.

Born as the princess, she understood the logical choice would be a political marriage with a foreign prince or powerful Heillander noble. But she'd made such a huge mistake in her previous life that she couldn't bring herself to do it again.

Besides, I'm...

"I am here to escort you, Your Highness."

She heard that low, clear voice calling out to her from behind. Flinching in response, she shook her head to clear away her thoughts.

"Thank you, Clovis."

A smile bloomed across Alicia's face as she turned to Clovis Cromwell, her black-haired adviser. Clovis had become more sophisticated as an adult; all remnants of youth were gone. His physical appearance was starting to resemble his self from Alicia's previous life, but his loyalty towards her remained as strong as ever.

Their height difference was much less now, but Alicia still had to look upward to meet the eyes of the tall man. The adviser gasped softly, and Alicia tilted her head in confusion.

“What? Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no...” Clovis’s answer was vague as he averted his gaze. Alicia was also at a loss for words, seeing Clovis dressed in formal attire.

It wasn’t too different from how he usually dressed, but after meeting the foreign princes, Alicia was sure no one would question her if she told them Clovis was a crown prince himself. At this rate, he would capture the attention of all the young ladies today. In truth, Alicia had also felt the eyes of those ladies on her, most probably because of her needlessly handsome adviser.

It wasn’t fun at all.

“...You have no clue what I’m going through,” Alicia muttered.

Clovis frowned. “Apologies. Did Your Highness say something?”

“I’m just talking to myself.”

Nigel Otto returned to their side after escorting the Crownes.

“So, shall we go? Our guests are waiting.”

“Yes, Father... Clovis.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Clovis bowed respectfully, then held out a gloved hand with a smile. “Please allow me to escort you, Your Highness.”

Alicia saw herself reflected in those clear, violet eyes, and her restless heart refused to settle down. Clovis was her valued subject. Her partner. She always controlled her emotions by setting clear boundaries, but sometimes, her locked-up emotions threatened to burst out, triggered by the unsuspecting Clovis and his actions.

He really has no clue what I’m going through.

Again, Alicia could only glare at her utterly loyal and handsome adviser, then place her hand in his, defeated.



THE day proceeded smoothly with the luncheon party, garden party, and parade by the marching band. A section of the castle grounds was opened to the public, and the audience was awed by the parade performed by the band,

marveling at the loud music and coordinated marching of the performers.

Soon, the sun set, and the great hall lit up with a sparkling orange glow. A splendid ball was underway.

Clovis watched over the scene from his spot by the wall at the end of the hall. The handsome black-haired man leaned against the wall, long legs crossed, drawing the passionate gazes of many excited young noble ladies. However, Clovis didn't notice any of them. His intelligent violet eyes followed Alicia as she danced in the center of the hall. The princes of each country had been lining up to dance with her, and she did so charmingly each time.

Her current partner was the second prince of Reinsus. His face was scarlet as he led the dance awkwardly, obviously enthralled by the Blue Rose of Heiland. In contrast, Alicia appeared calm as she moved, effortlessly covering up the prince's missteps.

The two spun around to the tune of a waltz, the hem of Alicia's light blue dress fluttering gently. Everyone present exclaimed in admiration of the princess's dignified beauty. She was no longer a small girl but almost an adult woman. The prince also seemed to remember himself, tightening his hold on Alicia's waist. Clovis frowned at the sight.

Suddenly, a voice called out as a duo joined him.

"Oi, oi, you okay with that parasite clinging onto your beloved princess?"

"It's you, Robert. Oh, and you, too..."

Robert von Belt and Riddhe Sutherland had walked over to join Clovis, the latter popping up from behind Robert and flipping his hair up theatrically.

"You never change, Cromwell. It's a ball, and here you are being a wallflower. It's just too pathetic, so I'm here to lend a hand."

"What do you mean, Riddhe boy? You're the one acting like a wallflower to hide from District Commissioner Dreyfus," Robert teased.

"Wh-What did you say?! You promised you wouldn't tell!"

"...You two never change, do you?" Clovis sighed before they could start bickering again.

Robert had been his friend since their days as part of the inspection squad, and the man had achieved his own success in the last six years. He was now commander of the knights of the Imperial Guard as well as a special adviser to the Southern Knight Division. Despite being busy, he remained a close friend.

As for Riddhe, the festering animosity between them slowly faded the more they interacted professionally, and they were friendly enough to exchange pleasantries when they met. In fact, Riddhe was the one who liked to seek him out now (for different reasons than before), which was almost as annoying for Clovis.

Distracted by his friends, Clovis failed to notice Alicia had finished her dance and disappeared from the dance floor. No thanks to Robert and Riddhe, he'd lost sight of his mistress.

Riddhe watched Clovis quickly scan the hall, looking for Alicia's signature sky-blue hair, and shrugged as if bored. "You don't have to be a protective adviser all the time. Look! Princess Alicia isn't the only flower blooming tonight! You should take off that stiff mask of yours and have fun."

"I don't have time for that. I promised to serve Her Highness with my life."

"Seriously. You're going to become an old bachelor at this rate, you know? You'll be alone for the rest of your life!" Riddhe insisted.

"Hey, Riddhe boy. Speak for yourself," Robert chided with a grin. "If you don't find a wife soon, you'll have to start calling Lord Dreyfus 'father.' Oh, did I get it wrong? Is that really going to come true any day now?"

Riddhe flipped his reddish hair backward as he hissed at Robert. "L-Listen up! I'm not gonna marry that district commissioner's daughter! I am a Sutherland! My graceful temperament does not match that bearish man!"

"That's how you feel, but Lord Dreyfus has taken a liking to you, hasn't he? Besides, you don't dislike his daughter, do you?"

"...Well, that's... Lady Emma is... Erm..."

Riddhe shrank into himself as he stuttered. Clovis stared at him with wide eyes. Were the rumors true, then? That Riddhe had fallen for District Commissioner Dreyfus's daughter when he was coerced into attending a tea

party at the Dreyfus Mansion?

The red-faced Riddhe sputtered out a few more excuses before giving up in frustration. “Argh, seriously! Leave me alone! We’re supposed to be talking about you, Cromwell!”

“Me? What about me?”

“About your future, of course. In other words, marriage.”

Clovis took a step back as Riddhe stabbed a finger in his direction.

“But I’ve told you. I have no time to find a partner.”

“No time? Then make time! Are you stupid?”

Riddhe was right, and the talented adviser had no words of rebuttal, but Clovis wasn’t going to let Riddhe Sutherland corner him.

“Besides, you should think more seriously about your life. You’re gonna be such a boring rival if you... Oh, dammit!”

Before Clovis could say anything, Riddhe stiffened. Following his gaze, Clovis saw the bearded district commissioner, Dan Dreyfus, looking around the hall as if searching for someone.

“You go think about it, aight?!!”

With that, Riddhe sprinted away like a spooked rabbit, disappearing into the dancing crowd. Clovis watched in disbelief, but Robert shook his silver head and laughed.

“Hahaha! I just can’t hate that guy. If only he was this interesting before, our time together in the inspection squad would have been so much more fun.”

“He’s...quite a noisy one.”

“Truly! But he’s right, you know?”

Clovis narrowed his eyes at his chuckling friend. Was Robert also implying that he should start checking out the ladies?

As if sensing Clovis’s thoughts, Robert’s eyes filled with amusement as he took in the scene of the magnificent ball. “Look at that. The second prince of Ostre, His Highness Navale, seems to have asked our princess to dance.”

“What?”

Flustered, Clovis followed Robert’s gaze to see Alicia being led by the hand to the center of the hall. With a light wave of the conductor’s hand, the orchestra started a gentle tune, and the two royals drew close and danced.

The Ostrean prince was probably three years older than Alicia. Tall and handsome, with a head full of shining gold hair, he looked every bit like a prince. In fact, he vaguely resembled Erdal’s Crown Prince Fritz, often described as the incarnation of an archangel or celestial being.

Crown Prince Fritz.

He must be nineteen years old now. During his two years as part of the inspection squad, Clovis caught glimpses of the crown prince from afar during ceremonies. He was still a child back then, and his androgynous beauty made it hard to tell if he was a boy or a girl. However, Clovis remembered that he seldom showed emotion on his beautiful face, giving the impression that he was a life-like doll.

After returning to Heilland, he’d not had the chance to meet Fritz again, though he had seen his portraits numerous times, no thanks to the empress who kept sending them over, hoping for a match between her son and Alicia. The portraits showed that the crown prince had grown into a splendid young man. With broad shoulders that suited the man who would become the next emperor, his eyes shone bright with intelligence.

“In my previous life, King Fritz was a beautiful and amazing man, and I was hopelessly in love with him.”

That was what Alicia had shared with him, and Clovis could sense the charm that drove the previous Alicia crazy.

“Don’t you find it funny?”

Robert’s sudden question pulled Clovis out of his thoughts.

“Funny? What’s funny?”

“All those men asking our princess to dance, of course,” Robert replied with a casual shrug. “What do they know about her? Most of them are just attracted

to her beauty and the fact that she's poised to become Heilland's next ruler. None of them see the real charm that's hidden inside. And that Erdalian crown prince is the worst. He's never even met her before."

"It can't be helped. Royal marriages are never simple. Many do not even meet each other until after the wedding ceremony."

"True, but you're the one person in this whole world who knows our princess the best." Robert's smile turned sad. "That's why I feel so sorry for you."

"What do you mean?"

For the first time, Clovis turned to face his friend head-on. Robert's usual smile was gone, leaving a serious expression.

The lovely melody resonated through the hall, mixing with laughter, but the mood surrounding the two young men was the opposite.

Finally, Robert spoke again.

"Are you ready to accept our princess taking someone as her husband?"

"What are you talking about? Of course, I am."

"I'm being serious here."

Robert's grave tone made Clovis swallow his next words. He wanted to cut the conversation short, but Robert's sincere attitude was so uncharacteristic that he couldn't do it.

"As the princess's adviser, you've supported her almost as much as, or maybe even more than, King James. But when she takes a husband, that role will no longer be yours."

"I know that."

"No, you don't. If what you feel for her is pure loyalty, then I have nothing to say. But that's not true, is it? I won't say anything else, but you have to be prepared to distance yourself. If not, you'll be the one suffering in the end."

"That's absurd!"

Clovis immediately regretted his harsh outburst. Closing his eyes, he let out a long sigh, then lifted his lips in a smile.

“You worry too much. I’ve always been, and will always be, just an adviser. Even if Her Highness stops relying on me, I will still lend her my strength in whatever way she needs.”

“Is that so?” Robert sighed as he looked up at the ceiling.

Clovis looked down at his right hand, recalling when a young Alicia had grasped it.

How else do you expect me to reply?

Clutching his hand into a fist, Clovis frowned.

“There you are!!”

A light voice called out, and Clovis felt someone leap into his arms. Blinking, he registered that familiar sky-blue hair and felt a firm grasp on his right hand.

“Y-Your Highness?!”

The usually calm adviser sounded slightly hysterical at the sudden appearance of his mistress.



JUST a while ago...

“Oh, Alicia. You are truly beautiful... I wish I could take you away and hide you from everyone’s eyes.”

“Thank you...”

They were in the center of the splendid hall, dancing to the tune of a light waltz. Alicia’s smile faltered at the line she’d heard repeated by so many since the start of the ball. Every prince said something similar to her as they concluded their dance. Alicia suspected it was all lines memorized from some social etiquette book.

Her current partner was Navale, the second prince of Ostre. Ostre was a kingdom south of Erdal, characterized by a warm climate, rich agriculture, and passionate citizens. Prince Navale was no exception to that rule, speaking passionate words of love without hesitation. Even though Alicia liked him more than the others, the conversation was exhausting.

In contrast to her fatigue, Navale seemed energized as he swept a hand through his beautiful blond hair. “Oh!” Navale suddenly exclaimed in annoyance. “Forgive me, Alicia. I wish I could take your hand and dance forever, but I have to go! There are other maidens waiting for me!”

“Oh, yes. Please feel free to fulfill your duty.”

Alicia easily let him go with a wave.

The maidens Navale was referring to were the foreign princesses and noble ladies at the ball. A social butterfly with a passionate nature and good looks, he was naturally popular among them. Even as they spoke, she felt the intense gazes of the ladies on them and almost heard their silent pleas for Navale to choose to dance with them next. So Alicia was more than happy to return the prince to them.

However, Navale’s shoulders drooped exaggeratedly when Alicia didn’t move to stop him. “You’re so different from the other girls. But I love that about you.”

“Yes, yes. Look, that lady has been waiting for Your Highness all this while. Please hurry to her.”

“Hmm? Oh, you’re right. I was too busy to notice.” With a light shrug, Navale threw her a teasing wink. “By the way, Alicia. Isn’t there a particular someone you’d like to dance with?”

“P-Pardon?”

“Oh, was I just imagining things? I was wondering because you always seem to be on the lookout for someone. Oh! If there really is a man who has won this beautiful princess’s heart, how jealous I’ll be!”

The image of a black-haired man came into Alicia’s mind at the prince’s words.

“N-No, there’s no such person!”

Alicia shook her head hard, trying to dislodge the image. She scolded herself for having such shameful thoughts.

Navale, on the other hand, just smiled as if he knew all about Alicia’s private thoughts. Then he turned on his heel gracefully. “Ciao! If you ever fall out of

love, I'll come right away. You can cry all your beautiful tears onto my chest!"

"I said there's no one!!"

Navale laughed at Alicia's desperate cry. Then he disappeared into the crowd with a final wave.

Despite his southern passion, Navale was one of the princes Alicia could talk to easily. Behind the flirtatious and radiant smile was a calm and rational thoughtfulness. He would make a reliable diplomatic partner.

That was why his words shook Alicia so much. In the short time they'd spent dancing together, he'd already discerned something no one else had. She had to find somewhere to be alone and gather her thoughts...

Just as she sank into her thoughts, something made her flinch.

Oh no.

One on the right, two on the left. Another one behind her. The chills raced through Alicia as she stood in the center of the hall lit by sparkling chandeliers.

Again and again.

Every time Alicia was alone, she felt gazes landing on her, waiting for their turn to speak. Since the ball began, she had been stuck in its dead center.

Her legs were about to give way.

What should I do? I can't dance anymore...!

She sensed several people stepping forward, ready to call out to her, and she looked around, panicked. Finally, she spotted Clovis chatting with his friends.

She made her move.

Falling back on the speed that shocked the church kids during their game of tag when she was a child, Alicia sprinted away from the center of the hall. Then, discarding all shame and decorum, she leaped into her trusty adviser's arms.

"Y-Your Highness?!"

"Thank goodness... Oh, they're not coming after me, right?!"

"What?"

Standing back up, Alicia looked around anxiously, but Clovis only stared at her, dumbfounded.

It was Robert who recovered first from Alicia's sudden appearance. With his shining silver hair neatly tied up in a ponytail and slim figure in elegant formalwear, he looked more beautiful than usual.

"How have you been, princess? Oh, have I mentioned how lovely you look tonight? Your dress suits you so very well."

"Thank you, Robert. You look wonderful yourself... Anyway, may I borrow Clovis for a bit? Were you talking about something important?"

"No, not at all!" Robert smiled widely as he raised his hands. "In fact, we just finished our conversation."

"Perfect!"

Alicia's face lit up as she wove her arm through Clovis's. Her adviser remained too stunned for words, but she had already started walking away, leaving him no choice but to follow.

"Wh-What's happening?! Where are we going?!" he asked, flustered.

"I've realized something."

Alicia's tone was serious as she walked, and Clovis swallowed hard at her uncharacteristic behavior. Suddenly aware of their surroundings, Clovis lowered his head so he could whisper in her ear.

"...Could it be? Have you remembered something from your previous life?"

"Oh, sorry. Nothing like that." Alicia's plain answer took Clovis aback. Then the princess spoke again in a solemn voice. "The princes won't ask me to dance if I'm already with another man."

"...Huh?"

"I don't want to dance anymore."

Alicia trembled slightly next to her surprised adviser. Clovis might look down on her for this, but it was a matter of life and death for Alicia.

Finally, Clovis frowned, understanding.

“So, you’re using me to ward them off?”

“Can’t I?”

Alicia looked up at her adviser with tragic, tear-filled eyes. Those who only knew the dignified princess trained by Lady Fourier would be shocked to see her. Seeing her silent plea not to be abandoned, Clovis chuckled.

“Of course. You may use me any way you like.”

“Thank goodness!”

A smile bloomed on Alicia’s face, and Clovis’s pale cheeks reddened faintly. Confused by his sudden change in demeanor, Alicia tilted her head, but Clovis frowned in embarrassment and turned away.

And so, the pair slipped away from the dancers and escaped to the balcony.



THE cool night breeze gently caressed her tired, hot body. After making sure her adviser was the only one around, Alicia leaned back against the railings.

“I thought my legs were going to fall off.”

“Couldn’t Your Highness have turned down the dances before it got to this stage?”

“If only I were a sweet talker like you. It would have been child’s play to turn them down,” Alicia retorted with a pout.

Clovis chuckled at her complaint. She felt just as close to her adviser as always, and the pleasant feeling made Alicia’s shoulders sag in relief.

“But I didn’t leave empty-handed.” Turning to face Clovis, Alicia puffed out her chest with pride. “The crown prince of Reinsus and the second princess of Ostre will be officially betrothed this year.”

“What...?! Is that true?”

“Prince Navale told me himself very willingly after I shared some information on our neighbors that the Mercurius Company discovered.”

Each dance with a prince was a chance to glean useful information. That was another reason why she didn’t turn down any offers. Besides, the princes of the

two kingdoms of concern were both present tonight. It was a golden opportunity Alicia hadn't dared dream of.

Both Reinsus and Ostre were powerful kingdoms that shared borders with Erdal. Just like with Heilland and Erdal, the two were never on good terms. However, the advisory office recently gathered information that a joint ceremony was held, with the two royal families interacting with each other and quickly getting closer.

That was probably due to Erdal's growth as an empire. With the success of the empress's reforms, Erdal had grown more powerful. Furthermore, rumors were circulating that some officials in Erdal were thinking of expanding their empire's territory.

That common threat outweighed any long-standing grudges between Reinsus and Ostre, as they finally joined hands to oppose the increasingly powerful Erdal.

Clovis placed a gloved hand on his chin, his eyes narrowing in thought at Alicia's revelation. "The situation in the south is finally getting worse. However, Reinsus and Ostre alone do not have the power to stop Erdal."

"I think they know that as well. That's why Navale suggested marrying me as a solution. A tripartite alliance between Heilland, Ostre, and Reinsus should be enough to keep Erdal surrounded on all sides," Alicia said.

"...Prince Navale always surprises me. From a distance, it just looked like he was busy trying to seduce you."

"Oh? You're just imagining things."

Alicia smiled, meeting the violet gaze of her adviser. Of course, she had only conveyed the most important information to Clovis, leaving out the prince's long proclamations of love. Otherwise, it would have taken forever to get the point across.

But Clovis saw through her and gave Alicia a meaningful look.

"So, is Your Highness planning to accept Prince Navale's marriage proposal?"

"Marriage proposal? It's nothing as serious as that."

“Didn’t you just say the prince suggested you marry him?”

“...Well, I guess he did.” Alicia crossed her arms and glared at the sky. After a moment, she shook her head firmly. “I won’t accept. Knowing Navale, he’d go to war with Erdal the moment the tripartite alliance with Heilland is formed. I don’t want my marriage to be the start of a war.”

If Heilland planned to go against Erdal, they would have contacted either Reinsus or Ostre once the advisory office gleaned the information that the two kingdoms were getting close. In other words, the lack of action from Heilland was a sign that they did not wish to engage Erdal in conflict.

Alicia looked up at her adviser. She knew he was intelligent enough to discern this without her explanation. However, Clovis slowly closed his amethyst eyes and laughed. It was so unlike his usual polite self that Alicia’s heart skipped a beat.

“That’s right. That’s exactly like you, Your Highness.”

“Hey! Are you laughing at me?”

“Of course not, but your attitude must be rough on those foreign princes.” Clovis chuckled, amused, as he reached a hand toward Alicia... Only to stop.

Oh, it’s happening again...

Clovis frowned as if unsure of what his hand was doing. Then he drew it back as if nothing had happened. Alicia’s heart prickled with hurt.

In the past, he would have naturally patted Alicia on the head, but he was stopping himself now. This wasn’t the first time it had happened, either. For some reason, he hesitated to touch Alicia these days.

As her adviser, he showed no hesitation in his duties as he escorted her everywhere, but when they were alone or having a friendly conversation, his uncertainty became clear as day. If Clovis had patted her on the head, Alicia might have gotten angry at him for treating her like a child. But his pulling away from touching her just made her feel lonely.

“Your Highness?”

Before she knew it, she had reached for Clovis’s hand. Looking up at the taller

man in the darkness, her adviser's pale cheeks were painted orange from the light spilling out from the hall.

You may touch me.

She would never speak those words.

Until she could change the future and save Heiland, she wouldn't allow anyone into her heart. That was Alicia's promise to herself after her bitter experience with love in her previous life. Besides, it would be too selfish to ask for Clovis's affection. He was her adviser; she had no right to ask more of him.

But the way he showed her his unguarded face always made her heart pound. She wished he could stand before her as Clovis Cromwell rather than as her adviser. She wanted to know him better.

She wanted them to be closer.

Perhaps she stared at him too long, for Clovis's violet gaze wavered, and he broke eye contact. His expression was sad but beautiful, making Alicia's heart race. Finally, he spoke.

"Your Highness, I—"

"Oh. I see you two are as close as ever."

The unexpected voice made Alicia and Clovis flinch and jump away from each other. Clad in an elegant dress, noble and proud even in her later years, Beatrix Crowne smiled as she approached the pair.



ALICIA hurried towards the wife of Erdal's foreign affairs minister, who seemed to have appeared on the balcony out of thin air.

"Lady Beatrix! What brings you out here?"

"No need to stand on ceremony. I'm not a member of the royal family anymore." Beatrix laughed easily with a graceful wave of her hand. However, Beatrix was still the sister of Erdal's former emperor and King James's aunt to boot. It would be remiss of Alicia to drop all formalities.

Just as Alicia was about to run off to fetch her father, Lady Crowne placed

both hands on Alicia's cheeks, giving them an affectionate squeeze.

"Oh, my...nephew's little girl. Who cares what the right kinship terminology is? You're just so adorable, Your Highness!"

"E-Erm... Lady Beatrix...!"

"Please, call me Lady Bea, like you did when you were little. I've been waiting to squeeze these cheeks all day, but there were so many people about."

Alicia was at the mercy of the lady, who had dropped all pretense to play with her. Beatrix had always had this bad habit. Despite having the image of a dauntless woman, she had a weakness for cute things and loved them to a fault.

Just as Alicia feared Beatrix would grab her and start rubbing their cheeks together, a quiet cough interrupted them.

"That is quite enough. Her Highness is already a young lady." Despite his polite words, Clovis's gaze seemed resentful as he watched Beatrix.

Why are you looking at her that way?!

Alicia wanted to reprimand Clovis but couldn't get a word out, no thanks to Beatrix squishing her cheeks in.

After a few more long minutes, Lady Crowne finally released Alicia.

Having regained her freedom, Alicia swiftly put some distance between herself and Beatrix before wondering why she had appeared on the balcony in the first place. Despite her love of cute things, Beatrix was a woman fully aware of her powerful position.

As the wife of Erdal's foreign affairs minister and a deeply trusted confidante of Empress Elizabeth, she was a force to be reckoned with. Perhaps that was why she'd always maintained her distance with Heiland's royalty, despite her affection for her sister and nephew's families.

Back in the hall, she approached Alicia of her own accord in front of everyone. That was not a simple act of a grand-aunt excited to see her cute niece again.

Clovis must have come to the same conclusion; he straightened his back and bowed to Beatrix respectfully. "Allow me to take my leave, but please let me escort you to a private room, esteemed ladies. This place is too open to have a

private conversation.”

The calm Clovis had correctly assessed the situation again, but, to his surprise, Lady Crowne shook her head at the suggestion.

“No need for that. Her Highness is the next ruler of Heilland, and you, Clovis Cromwell, are rumored to be the next chief adviser. Erdal will have to stay on your good side if we want to maintain our countries’ friendly relations. There is nothing wrong with wanting to speak with you,” Beatrix explained with an innocent-looking smile.

“...I see. Could that be the reason for your attendance tonight?” Clovis asked, violet eyes narrowed.

Her adviser appeared calm, but Alicia knew he was inwardly surprised by Beatrix’s answer because she felt the same way. She had just referred to Alicia as the next ruler of Heilland. That was as good as Empress Elizabeth declaring Alicia was King James’s heir.

If Lady Fourier had been present, Alicia was sure her iron mask would have fallen off at the shocking statement, and the lady would have excused herself immediately to report the matter to King James.

Despite her youth, Alicia had been an unusually revolutionary princess, launching several new policies with Clovis’s help. The results of those policies had made her an obvious candidate as Heilland’s next ruler, both domestically and internationally.

Only Empress Elizabeth, pursuing a betrothal between Alicia and Fritz in hopes of putting her son on Heilland’s throne, refused to see Alicia as nothing more than a normal princess. Knowing the empress’s motives, King James had been biding his time, waiting for the best moment to publicly name Alicia as his heir.

But now...

“You’re surprised. Well, that’s understandable.” Beatrix must have noticed the shock on their faces. Her red lips lifted in a smile as she watched Alicia fumble for words. Then she dropped the next bombshell. “Your Highness, Her Majesty the Empress is still keen on having you as His Highness Fritz’s consort,

even if you become Heilland's ruler."

"Is that... Is that really true?"

"Her Majesty has been interested in you for quite some time; a small princess with the extraordinary power to change her kingdom."

Was the empress really interested in her?

Alicia had always thought the empress saw her as a stepping stone for her son, Fritz, to ascend to Heilland's throne; she could only blink in confusion.

"I know what you're thinking, Your Highness," Beatrix said with a wry smile. "But Her Majesty has changed her mind. She really wants to have *you*."

"But does Crown Prince Fritz feel the same way? What about the Senate? Is everyone convinced of Her Majesty's intentions?"

Beatrix only smiled at Alicia's questions. A cold reminder that the woman was speaking to Alicia not as a beloved grand-aunt but as the empress's representative.

But she thought she knew why the empress chose this moment to make contact.

The fact that Reinsus and Ostre are working together must have worried her...

Considering Erdal's current status, even the combined strengths of Reinsus and Ostre would not pose a major threat to them. However, it would be a different story if Heilland joined the alliance. It was no coincidence that Prince Navale had just proposed that very alliance to besiege Erdal from both the north and the south.

Now, the empress had shown her hand by approaching Heilland first. Everything made sense.

"...That said, Her Majesty is not completely taken with you yet, if only because you two have not had the chance to meet in person."

Illuminated by the lights from the hall behind her, Beatrix spread her arms wide. With her face shadowed this way, Alicia thought she glimpsed the empress's smile on her grand-aunt's face.

“Come to Erdal, Your Highness. Step into our empire and prove that you are worthy of being Heilland’s next ruler.”

The red lips floating in the darkness seemed to speak to her.

“Come, Alicia. Show me what you are capable of.”

6. On That Night, We All Gather

THE glittering feast ended, and the curtain of night fell in silence. Without the soft melodies of the waltz and the whispering laughter of guests, the pattering of a light rain filled the dark night. Alicia slid a finger along the glass windowpane, reveling in the calm after a hectic day.

Then the clinking of porcelain drew her attention back into the room.

“Here, Your Highness.”

Turning around, she saw Clovis gesturing to a freshly poured cup of tea with a smile. Picking up the cup with a word of thanks, she inhaled the fragrance of fresh wood wafting in the air. She took a small sip, letting the warmth spread throughout her body, then breathed a sigh of relief.

“You’re so talented. Annie taught me how to brew tea, but I can never get it as fragrant as this.”

“It’s only because Miss Annie gave me quality leaves to brew with.”

Clovis’s smile was happy as he sat opposite Alicia and picked up his cup.

They were alone in Alicia’s office. It was a small room where she used to meet with her tutors for lessons or her daily meetings with Clovis, but as the king slowly entrusted more government affairs to her, piles of papers, books, and documents took up the desk. Seeing these things, Alicia realized how quickly time had flown by. But the Clovis she shared everything with was still the same, which was a great comfort.

Taking another sip, she fixed her gaze on her adviser. “What do you think of Lady Beatrix’s comment?”

Clovis froze before giving Alicia a questioning look. Slowly, he placed his cup on the desk and clasped his hands together on his knees. “I feel that we shouldn’t read too much into it.”

“May I ask why?”

“It’s too dangerous. We still don’t know who the official who colluded with the former Duke of Sutherland is. We have to find out if that person is working with Empress Elizabeth before we enter their domain. Besides...”

“Besides?”

Clovis’s violet gaze wavered despite Alicia’s prompting. Then he sighed before schooling his features, wiping away the brief frown that creased his brow. “Besides, going to Erdal means that Your Highness will have to meet Crown Prince Fritz. I do not wish for that to happen.”

Alicia lowered her gaze to stare into her cup as she tried to remember Fritz, the crown prince of Erdal. Yet every time she did so, the image of Fritz that surfaced in her mind was not the young man in the portraits she’d seen so many times but the husband from her previous life that she saw in her dreams.

“Alicia...”

The man with the beautiful face turned pale when Alicia caught him with his arms around his beloved mistress. The man who brought about Heilland’s ruin with his oppressive style of governance.

Shaking her head, Alicia forced a smile onto her face. “I’ll never want him as my husband or king of my people. Not after seeing what he’d done. But if Empress Elizabeth recognizes me as Heilland’s next ruler, what is the harm in paying them a visit?”

“...That doesn’t change the fact he was the cause of suffering for both Heilland’s citizens and you.” Clovis’s low voice sounded pained as his clasped fingers tightened their grip. As her wise adviser, he knew the right choice. Heilland was at a crossroads now. Reinsus and Ostre had already decided how they wanted to deal with the powerful Erdal. It was now Heilland’s turn.

Leaning forward, Alicia reached a hand out to the frowning Clovis’s temple and flicked.

“Ow...!”

“You’re worrying too much again!”

Clovis appeared shocked, but Alicia crossed her arms and smiled.

“We’re just paying them a visit. There’s no need to overthink it.”

“But—”

“It’s not like I’m going to marry him just by seeing his face, right? We’ll be fine. If Crown Prince Fritz is not the right king for Heilland, I’ll never budge, no matter what Empress Elizabeth says.”

Clovis opened and closed his mouth several times, then finally lowered his eyes, resigned. “I guess your mind is already made up.”

“It is,” Alicia answered with a nod, her sky-blue gaze never leaving Clovis’s form. Beatrix said Empress Elizabeth was interested in Alicia, but the same could be said for Alicia. “I want to learn more about Empress Elizabeth and Crown Prince Fritz and make my own decision going forward. I need to find out what course of action Heilland should take against Erdal. Also, a visit may uncover clues regarding the official behind that incident. I know it’s a small chance, but I’m willing to take the risk. That incident cannot be resolved until we discover the truth.”

That incident, which caused an uproar six years ago, involved an Erdalian official using Duke Loid Sutherland to interfere with Heilland’s domestic politics. Back then, it was impossible to track down the ones responsible without potentially straining their relationship with their neighbor. Alicia’s regret had not lessened despite the years; it stuck like a thorn in her heart.

And that was not all.

The mastermind was a truly cunning character. It was shocking enough that they got a heavyweight like Loid on their side, but the fact that they disappeared without a single trace after assassinating the duke was a true feat.

Such an enemy would surely try to attack Heilland again someday.

Alicia had promised to change the future and protect Heilland’s citizens. She could not let this person get away.

Seeing the determination shining in his mistress’s eyes, Clovis’ shoulders sagged as he sighed. “...Never giving up on anything or anyone. That is just like

you.”

“I guess you still don’t approve?”

“To be honest, I want to convince Your Highness to drop the idea, but I know I’ll never win against your determination,” Clovis answered with a bitter smile.

How much time did she have left to change the future?

She didn’t know the answer, but she knew what she had to do.

With her mind made up, Alicia issued her command. “I will meet with Empress Elizabeth. Let us travel to Erdal, Clovis.”



A few days later, an official letter arrived from Erdal, inviting Alicia to visit. King James wrote back at once, confirming the invitation and tasking the advisory office to deliver his response to Erdal.

And that was how the princess embarked on her first overseas tour.

On the morning of their departure, King James stood on his balcony, looking out at the town of Egdiel. Standing behind him, Chief Adviser Nigel Otto let out a small sigh.

“Is this really all right? Shouldn’t we stop Her Highness from leaving?”

“Hmm?”

“We’ve turned down all their marriage proposals, but they haven’t given up. This may be their attempt to force a romance between Her Highness and the crown prince.”

“Are you worried Cia will fall in love with Crown Prince Fritz? I didn’t take you as the superstitious type,” James replied with a chuckle.

“Your Majesty! I’m being serious here!”

They were the only ones on the balcony, so Nigel could let his true feelings show.

However, King James’s eyes just crinkled in amusement. “If Cia really falls in love, then I’ll gladly approve of their match. I trust her judgment.”

“But that’s so reckless...”

Nigel’s shoulders sagged at the king’s unconcerned attitude. But King James had a point. Princess Alicia had grown into a splendid woman with the right to see things with her own eyes and choose her own path. She would never take someone who would harm Heiland as her husband.

Besides, she also had *him* by her side.

I’m counting on you, Clovis Cromwell. Please serve our princess well.

Looking down upon the castle town, Nigel entrusted everything to his reliable subordinate.



THE steady swaying of the carriage lulled Alicia into a gentle, light sleep.

“Change the future, Alicia; that is the pact between you and me.”

The voice of a youth she met long ago echoed amid the noisy clacking of the carriage wheels. Unable to see him, she looked around, finally spotting a wooden cylinder rolling on the ground. It was a kaleidoscope, the same one she’d seen just before her death in her previous life and that the boy had shown her. What was it doing here?

Puzzled, Alicia reached out to the object, but it was further away from her than it seemed. She couldn’t reach it. Slightly panicked, Alicia leaned forward...

“...—ness, Your Highness.”

“...Sorry, I fell asleep.”

Alicia rubbed her eyes and sat up from where she’d slumped over in her seat. That was right; they had been talking about the arrangements once they arrived in Erdal, and she’d somehow nodded off.

Clovis sat opposite her and frowned apologetically. “I didn’t know if I should wake you, Your Highness, but look.” He pulled back the curtain over the carriage’s small window. “We’ve reached Kingsley, the capital of Erdal.”

Strong sunlight pierced through the glass window, and Alicia shielded her eyes from the unfamiliar glare. Once her eyes adjusted to the brightness, she

peeked outside again, and her sky-blue eyes widened. The carriage was about to move through an arch built into a tall and imposing wall made of bricks, manned by numerous soldiers at the top. Several beautiful statues were set into the wall at intervals, each peering down at Alicia with unrelenting gazes.

Moving through the arch, they entered a wide street running through the city. Both sides were lined with tall buildings, and upon closer inspection, some walls were decorated with paintings that depicted scenes from some myth. The street soon opened into a large plaza, where a large bronze statue of Julius the Conqueror, Erdal's founder, sat atop his beloved horse, his sword bravely raised and looming over everyone.

Alicia's fingers tightened on the sill of the carriage's small window. Here was a city of beauty and art, perfectly conveying the power of Erdal.

"Amazing..."

Clovis looked worried at the slight tremble in Alicia's voice and reached out a reassuring hand. However, she suddenly turned to him excitedly before he could make contact.

"This is amazing! I'm really here in Erdal!!"

"...Yes, that's right."

Clovis couldn't help but chuckle at the sparkle in his mistress's eyes, which made her seem like her younger self again. Fascinated by the sights, Alicia didn't notice the way he quietly withdrew his hand.



ERDAL'S capital, Kingsley, was built in a circular layout. Surrounded by walls built to ward off enemies in the past, there were several gates of access, each with its own main road leading from the outside to the city center.

And there, in the middle, stood Kingsley Castle. Alicia found herself at a loss for words the moment she caught sight of it through the carriage window. The walls were painted a dazzling and magnificent white. As they drew closer, Alicia could make out elaborate carvings and paintings on those walls that seemed to come alive as her perspective shifted as the carriage moved and the way the sunlight fell on them.

The castle curved with a dome-shaped roof in the center. At the very top was a golden angel with his hands raised to the sky and wings spread wide, shining so brightly in the light of the setting sun.

“Wow... It looks so different from Egdiel Castle.”

“That’s because it never had to serve as a fortress. The interior and exterior of the castle are designed solely to show off Erdal’s might as an empire.”

Amazed, Alicia stepped out of her carriage and onto Erdalian soil for the first time. Her entourage consisted of her adviser, Clovis, her maids, Annie and Martha, Robert, and several other knights of the Imperial Guard assigned to guard the princess.

After confirming everyone was safe and present, Alicia looked up at the huge crowd gathered to welcome her... And at the very back, she spotted a head of blond hair shining in the sunlight.

“...Wow. He looks like a prince.”

“Silly. He doesn’t look like a prince; he *is* the prince!”

Alicia nodded quietly at the maids’ whispered conversation.

A tall youth dressed in white—a color perfectly suited for his dignified, sweet features. That dark green gaze, filled with strong light, met hers, and Alicia’s memories of her previous life rushed through her like a storm.

The king holding his mistress in his arms. The shadow of the approaching mob.

Rage-filled condemnations and two pairs of footsteps running away.

A dull pain in her chest...

A high-pitched sound rang out, pulling Alicia back to the present.

The young man had descended the stairs, his movements smooth like flowing water. Then he lifted his face and fixed that dignified gaze on her again.

It was him. Without a single doubt.

“I am Fritz, crown prince of Erdal and first-born son of Empress Elizabeth. Welcome, Princess Alicia.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Your Highness. I am Alicia, daughter of Heilland’s King James. Thank you for your warm welcome.”

“No issue. Mother and I are not the only ones looking forward to your arrival. The whole of Erdal is thrilled to have you here.” Holding out his hand, Crown Prince Fritz tilted his head to one side, gazing at Alicia with a puzzled look. “It’s strange, blooming Blue Rose of Heilland. Maybe I’ve heard too much about you, but it feels like I’ve met you somewhere before.”

Crown Prince Fritz wouldn’t have memories of his previous life. He wouldn’t remember what he’d done to Heilland or how much its citizens had despised him. He would not recall how things had ended between them.

“Yes, I understand,” Alicia replied with a beautiful smile as she placed her hand in his. “I feel like I’ve met Your Highness somewhere before too.”

The crown prince’s eyes widened slightly at Alicia’s words, then narrowed in amusement. Alicia felt something sweet twist through her body.

In the eyes of the onlookers, Alicia and Fritz were the perfect match. Even Annie and Martha, who had been so sure that their princess would never fall that easily for the Erdalian crown prince, were enchanted by the pair now.

...But Clovis was the only one who understood the true meaning behind Alicia’s words. He glared at the side profile of the crown prince as he started to lead Alicia away. Instinctively, he made to step forward to follow the pair up the stairs.

“Careful there. Try to look friendly.”

Clovis stumbled forward as someone thumped him on the back. Turning around in indignation, he saw a grinning Robert.

“I’ll leave the friendliness to you,” he hissed. “I’ve never been good at that.”

“Even so, you look a little too intimidating,” Robert retorted with a shrug. “If you’re going to be like that, then you should hold on more tightly to her. That’s why I keep telling you that you’re not ready.”

“Wha—?!”

Before Clovis could get in a word of protest, the knight threw him a wink and

hurried after the princess. Clovis cursed. His friend had always been slippery like that.

He shook his head as he questioned himself. What expression had he been wearing on his face? Was his displeasure that obvious to everyone?

Damn it...!

Clovis slapped his cheeks with his hands, and the two maids in front turned to stare at him, startled. He paid them no heed. Ignoring Annie and Martha, Clovis marched after his mistress.



ALICIA was swiftly escorted into the castle and to an audience with Elizabeth. Only Alicia, Clovis, and Crown Prince Fritz were invited into the hall, while Annie, Martha, Robert, and the rest of the knights were told to wait in a separate room.

A large number of people were gathered in the audience hall. Unlike the citizens outside, who welcomed Alicia with flowers and bright smiles, the hall seemed filled with the senior members of Erdal's Senate and their families.

I wonder if they're all here to catch a glimpse of Heilland's princess.

Alicia was the embodiment of Heilland's history and culture. She finally understood the true meaning of Lady Fourier's pet phrase. But if the Erdalians wanted to size her up, Alicia was here to do the same. Casting sideways glances at the people who seemed to be appraising her, Alicia kept her features relaxed as she stepped boldly into the center of the hall without fear.

"I've brought Her Highness Princess Alicia here, Your Majesty," Fritz announced formally.

"Thank you."

The empress's voice was low for a woman, and Alicia lifted her head to meet her eyes. There was only one word to describe the empress: fierce.

Dressed in a crimson gown, with wavy gold hair that reminded her of the scorching summer sun, flawless white skin, and red lips, she was frighteningly beautiful. Her eyes were the same shade of green as her son's, but unlike his,

they held no trace of warmth.

A tired-looking man with sunken cheeks stood behind her, whom Alicia guessed to be the empress's loyal chancellor, Eric Yggdrasil.

"I am Alicia Chester, daughter of Heilland's King James. Thank you for your kind invitation."

"I am Elizabeth." The empress's short answer was followed by a quirk of her shapely lips. "News of your deeds has traveled far and wide, reaching as far as Erdal. And...you must be Clovis Cromwell. You were part of the inspection squad that visited us a while back."

"Yes." Clovis bowed politely. "I would like to express my sincere gratitude for your warm welcome. I am here this time as Princess Alicia's adviser."

"So I've heard. You have made full use of your talent to serve Alicia. I am glad to have already made your acquaintance."

"Your Majesty is too kind."

After acknowledging the smiling Clovis with a nod, the empress stood and gathered up her heavy skirts, walking to stand before Alicia. Then she placed her handheld fan under Alicia's chin, lifting the princess's face up.

"Your Majesty!"

Crown Prince Fritz sounded scandalized as the surrounding onlookers watched on anxiously.

Up close, the empress was magnificent and gorgeous. Her frosty green eyes, framed by long lashes, shone brightly, making Alicia flinch. Despite this, she was determined not to look away and held the empress's discerning gaze.

"I see, I see. You are truly the spitting image of your late mother. You've grown up well."

"...Thank you."

"Oh, Alicia, I do feel such regret. To think that it's taken me so long to finally meet you and witness your beauty, despite my countless requests to my cousin. Don't you think you two have been pretty heartless?"

Alicia felt the tension in the air, laced with excitement, as the onlookers waited to see how she would respond.

Two can play this game.

Alicia's lips lifted in a defiant smile, and the empress's cat-like eyes widened slightly. Drawing back from Elizabeth, Alicia bent gracefully to gather her skirts, then gave a polite bow.

"Please forgive my rudeness. I wanted to present my very best self to the famed Empress Elizabeth, and I apologize that it's taken so long. But it is my honor that we have finally met."

"Oh...?"

A small commotion rippled through the hall. Alicia's quick wit had helped her compliment the empress and preserve Heiland's dignity all at once. It was a brilliant answer.

The empress' eyes narrowed, then her red lips lifted in a satisfied smile. "Wonderful. As you said, you have grown up splendidly."

"Oh, I am not fully grown yet. Father has sent me here to learn from Your Majesty."

"I don't see why not. In fact, my people could learn a thing or two from you. Don't you agree, Fritz?"

Despite the empress's good mood, Fritz remained silent as he gave his mother a quiet smile, but Alicia's eyes widened when she glanced at the crown prince. While his features remained calm and sweet, she thought she saw a hard, icy glint flash in his deep green eyes for just a moment.

Fritz...?

"Let me introduce my vassals who will be serving you... Alicia?"

"Y-Yes!"

Alicia hurriedly returned her gaze to the frowning empress.

Elizabeth gestured to the man standing behind her.

The chancellor stepped down from the dais, his thin form dressed in a dark

green outfit. He looked exhausted, but his aura was as calm as a still water surface, giving Alicia a sense of relief for the first time since she stepped off her carriage.

“I am Eric Yggdrasil, Erdal’s chancellor. I will be making arrangements for various inspections during Your Highness’s stay here.”

“I am Alicia. Thank you for your efforts.”

“It is my duty... Lady Crowne.”

“Yes.”

Alicia was surprised as Beatrix Crowne stepped out of the crowd, her face lit with joy. She was still as graceful as always, but her eyes spoke of her wish to coddle her cute grand-niece.

Another noble also stepped forward behind Beatrix... And Alicia froze.

“You’re already acquainted with Lady Crowne, and she will be staying in Kingsley Castle during your visit,” the chancellor explained. “If you find it hard to speak to me about anything, please feel free to approach her instead... Your Highness?”

“Oh, of course. That will be lovely. Thank you.” Alicia fought to stay calm as she stuttered through her answer. “And the lady behind Lady Beatrix...?”

“Oh... Come on, introduce yourself.”

“Yes, Father.”

Father? Were her ears playing tricks on her? Alicia held her breath as the girl bowed, a sweet smile on her face and that unforgettable red hair flowing with every movement.

“I am Charlotte, Eric Yggdrasil’s daughter!”

“...It can’t be.”

Clovis, who had been watching the scene next to Alicia, could only whisper in shock. While Alicia couldn’t respond, she knew he had already connected the dots.

“Lady Crowne has taken my daughter under her wing, and she will be at your

service as well,” the chancellor explained. “Charlotte will also be staying in the castle.”

“She is a good girl, very smart, and close to your age. I’m sure you two will get along well,” Empress Elizabeth added.

“I may not be experienced, but I will do my best to make Your Highness’s stay as comfortable as possible. I look forward to serving you!”

Charlotte’s bright smile was like a flower blooming in summer, and Alicia was stunned for a while, not knowing what to say.

Charlotte Yggdrasil. The beloved mistress Crown Prince Fritz had brought to Heiland, and the woman he had chosen to escape the revolution with.

Alicia had never realized that she was the Erdalian chancellor’s daughter.

This is just...

Speechless, Alicia’s gaze darted to Fritz, then Charlotte, then Clovis.

“Please hurry, Your Majesty. Head towards the waterway.”

“But what about y—”

“Still bringing more shame to your name at this time, King Fritz?!”

Alicia closed her eyes to calm her racing heart, but the adrenaline refused to go away, and she started to tremble.

“Lady Beatrix and Lady Charlotte. Thank you for your service.” Bottling all her swirling emotions up, Alicia gathered her skirts and bowed gracefully. Then she aimed a smile at Charlotte.

The girl’s cheeks flushed with pride. “I’m honored to serve!”

The king of a ruined kingdom and his queen. The beloved mistress who owned the king’s heart. The mastermind of the revolution.

All the players were now here.

Alicia smiled.





AFTER their audience with Empress Elizabeth, their official duties continued.

According to the schedule arranged by Chancellor Eric Yggdrasil, Erdal's ministers, influential citizens, and high-ranking officials visited Alicia one after another, and she was busy until dinner.

After that, she dined with the empress, Crown Prince Fritz, and the rest of Erdal's royal family. Despite being well-versed in royal decorum, dining with Empress Elizabeth was a nerve-wracking experience. Alicia had zero recollection of what she ate during the meal.

Finally, when everything was over and she was brought to the rooms prepared for her, Alicia collapsed onto the sofa, exhausted.

"No, Your Highness, you cannot sleep there," Martha said.

"I'm not sleeping. I'm awake..."

"Oh! Your Highness! At least let us help you out of your dress!" Annie scolded.

"...Ahem, I'm still here."

Everyone froze at the apologetic voice.

"Huh?! Lord Clovis! What are you doing here?!" Annie shrieked.

"Her Highness is about to get changed. Are you here to peek? Oh dear!"

"What?! But I've been here all along!!" Clovis yelled, his face red.

Alicia, fighting sleep, pried open her eyes.

"Sorry, Clovis. I asked you here to talk about our schedule for tomorrow."

"Oh, it's no problem..." Averting his eyes awkwardly, Clovis snuck worried glances at his mistress. "Anyway, Your Highness seems exhausted. I can come earlier tomorrow, and we can talk about the schedule then?"

Grateful for her adviser's suggestion, Alicia was on the verge of agreeing before she stopped herself. Today was a shocking day. She'd met all the important characters from her previous life. No matter how tired she was, she couldn't sleep with her memories haunting her...

“No. I’d like to talk today. If you don’t mind, that is. You must be tired too,” Alicia said as she straightened up from her slumped position.

“I’m fine, but...”

“Oh, all right. We’ll help!” The reliable Annie huffed, looping an arm through Martha’s. “We’ll go make some herbal tea; it should combat the fatigue. Lord Clovis, please finish up your talk before we return.”

“I-I’ll try.”

“All right. Come on, Martha!”

“Okay~!”

The maids slipped out of the room before Alicia or Clovis could stop them. Left alone, the two looked at each other.

“...I’ve imposed on them again.”

“No worries. I’ll thank them later.”

Whenever Alicia sought Clovis’s opinion on a special matter (which more often than not concerned her previous life), her maids always sensed the mood and found excuses to leave them alone. While Alicia felt a little guilty, she was glad they were so understanding.

Finally alone, Alicia breathed a sigh of relief, but Clovis didn’t seem as relaxed. Taking a seat opposite his mistress at her insistence, he pressed a hand to his temple and groaned.

“At least it’s with me, but...” he muttered.

“Huh? What did you say?”

“...Your Highness. I’ve been meaning to say this for a long time, but if you’re going to be alone with a man, please be a little more guarded. You can be a little too defenseless.”

“Is that so...?”

“Yes!”

Alicia tilted her head at Clovis’s firm response, but her gaze remained soft and sleepy. Seeing her like this, Clovis turned away again with another groan, his

cheeks red.

“Do you really understand...?”

“It’s fine. I’m only like this with you, Clovis.”

“You always say that, but have you ever thought about how such a casual remark could be triggering for a man?”

“You’re funny. You don’t even know what you want to do to me in the first place.”

“Of course not!”

Despite his firm answer, a strange expression crossed Clovis’s face. As if he wanted to say something but found it hard to do so. But Alicia was already half-asleep and oblivious to her adviser’s turmoil, too far gone to notice anything.

Besides, I’ll always be a little girl in Clovis’s eyes...

Slumping to the side, Alicia pulled the blanket Annie had left on the sofa over her head like a hood, pouting.

After a moment of silence, she spoke.

“Charlotte... Lady Charlotte Yggdrasil. She was the one who escaped with King Fritz on the night of the revolution. I knew she was an Erdalian who came with him to Heiland, but I didn’t expect her to be the chancellor’s daughter.”

“I’m honored to meet you, Your Highness!”

Alicia’s grip on the blanket tightened as she recalled the girl’s words, said with a pure, innocent smile. She felt an indescribable tingling creeping down the back of her neck at the thought of having to see Charlotte again.

“Clovis, do the people of Erdal know that Her Majesty is keen on a marriage between Prince Fritz and me?”

“Of course. That was why you received such a warm welcome during our arrival.”

“I see...”

“Is something wrong?”

Alicia groaned softly. Aside from her simmering feelings for Clovis, she knew so little regarding matters of the heart. Finally, she spoke up reluctantly.

“Suppose you and I were secretly in love.”

“Huh?!”

“It’s just a supposition; no need to look so offended.”

She knew her adviser did not see her that way, but his shocked response stung. She glared at Clovis, and the flustered adviser let out a small cough as if embarrassed.

“Yes, just a supposition. All right. So, suppose that’s true. What, then?”

“Suppose you and I were secretly in love... And Crown Prince Fritz was invited to Heilland, and everyone treated him like he was my betrothed. How would you feel as my lover?”

Clovis looked distinctly upset at the made-up story, so unlike his usual calm and perfect self, it surprised Alicia. His violet eyes narrowed as he stared at Alicia, then looked away.

“This is all supposition and conjecture, right?”

“Yes.”

“In such a hypothetical case...”

“All right, already.”

Alicia bristled in annoyance at Clovis’s insistence, leveling a gaze to signal him to hurry and speak his mind. Finally, and with great reluctance, he continued.

“I’m sure I would feel very hurt.”

Sadness shimmered in Clovis’s eyes, and Alicia swallowed hard. He stared at her with such an indescribable expression that she couldn’t move a muscle.

This was bad... She’d been so tired that she hadn’t expected things to turn out this way. Panicked, she tried to rein in her heart before it exploded.

“I-I see. That would be normal, right?”

“In fact, it doesn’t matter if we were in love or not. Just the idea of that pains

me so much that I feel like I'm being torn apart, and makes me hate the crown prince."

"W-Wow... I never thought you'd think this way, Clovis."

"I'm not as perfect as you think I am."

Clovis gave a small smile as he replied with a shrug, and his light-hearted tone made Alicia sag with relief. For a moment, her foolish heart was convinced her adviser meant what he said.

Unaware of his mistress's relief, Clovis looked at Alicia searchingly again. "Are you wondering why Charlotte, who's probably in love with Crown Prince Fritz, doesn't seem to hate you?"

"Yes, exactly right." Alicia nodded quickly at her adviser's smart guess.

Somehow, Charlotte's attitude toward Alicia seemed too pure. She couldn't help but think the girl's smile was sincere, and she meant every word she said about wanting to make Alicia's stay at Kingsley Castle enjoyable.

"I initially thought she was just good at hiding her emotions, but she doesn't seem capable of that... Maybe her special relationship with the crown prince was unique to my previous life?" Alicia guessed.

"It's still too early to tell. If the two are in love, I doubt she would have been assigned to be in charge of serving Your Highness."

Before this visit, they had tried various ways to find the woman who would one day become Crown Prince Fritz's future mistress. However, they hadn't found Charlotte, despite her relatively public societal position as the chancellor's daughter.

It was possible that the information was suppressed to prevent rumors about Crown Prince Fritz from spreading and had failed to make its way to Heiland. And if the pair were secretly in love, she supposed the crown prince would rather keep Alicia and Charlotte away from each other so they would never meet.

"Now that we're here in Erdal, we may discover something new. I'll work on finding out more about Lady Yggdrasil. Meanwhile, please be careful in your

interactions with her, Your Highness.”

“Thank you, and sorry for all the trouble.”

“It’s no issue at all. It is my job as your adviser.” Despite his smooth answer, Clovis was frowning. After a moment, he seemed to make up his mind about something. “How did Your Highness feel about finally meeting Crown Prince Fritz?”

“With him? What do you mean?”

“...Do you feel any affection for him?”

Alicia almost fell off the sofa at her adviser’s reluctant query. She stared at Clovis uncomprehendingly.

“I’m being completely serious. I recall Your Highness telling me that you fell in love with the crown prince from your first meeting. If that has happened again, then we need to change our thinking.”

“Well...”

Alicia blinked. Before this moment, she’d never given the chance of falling in love with the crown prince a single thought. In fact, she felt absolutely nothing for him during their meeting. The idea hadn’t even crossed her mind.

Why?

She’d seen Fritz’s portraits so many times; she knew he was a charming youth. With the intellectual gaze and dignified demeanor of a politician, paired with a noble aura, he was naturally desirable as a potential match. It wouldn’t be strange for any woman, even Alicia, with her memories of her previous life, to dream of being the only woman to capture the prince’s heart.

But I know why.

Alicia gave a wry smile as Clovis waited for her answer.

No matter how she tried to deny her feelings, it was impossible to shut out this man who had served and supported her so well all this time. Clovis had become such an invaluable part of Alicia’s life that the line separating them as mistress and subject was becoming blurred.

“...It’s your fault.”

“Huh?”

“I’m just talking to myself.”

Alicia shook her head as she sat wrapped up in the blanket. The exhaustion was creeping in again. If she didn’t wrap up this conversation soon, she would say something she’d regret.

“As unromantic as it sounds, I’ve not fallen in love with the crown prince this time. But something doesn’t feel right.”

“Something?”

“I can’t read him.”

Clovis’s mouth fell open at Alicia’s unexpected answer. “Is that so? I feel he’s much more expressive now compared to his younger self.”

“Yes, I thought so, too, but he’s so different from the person I imagined when you told me about him... It’s his gaze back then...”

“His gaze?”

Alicia nodded, suppressing a yawn.

Honestly, Alicia had been relieved during their first meeting. She’d known nothing about the crown prince aside from the fact that he’d been in love with Charlotte in her previous life and a few small details Clovis had observed about the young prince during his time with the inspection squad. Neither had provided her with a good image of Fritz.

And while she couldn’t trust him fully because of what happened in her previous life, she had been relieved that Fritz turned out to be a friendly young man whom she could hold a civil conversation with.

That was until she caught sight of that terribly cold look in his eyes for the briefest of moments.

And that was because it resembled how Clovis had looked when she’d first met him.

It was the look of someone close to giving up.

Back then, Clovis had been humiliated for being of Graham's blood during the ceremony to celebrate the inspection squad's return. She'd also seen that same shadowed look hidden in Clovis's tense expression during his appointment ceremony when he noticed the absence of the Privy Council members.

The look of being shunned.

The look of being misunderstood.

The feeling of having the entire world as one's enemy and the impulse to throw everything away...

"I wonder if there's a rift between His Highness and Empress Elizabeth?" Alicia murmured, her head already nodding as her eyes threatened to close.

She could see the strange distance between Empress Elizabeth and Fritz. Despite being mother and son, their relationship felt no different from the one the empress had with the rest of her subjects.

Either way, it would be a mistake to take her first impression of Fritz as a carefree and relaxed young man to be a reflection of his true self. And since she couldn't read him, she might even need to watch herself more carefully around him than the empress...

With a final nod, the blanket slid from Alicia's head, exposing her shoulders, but she was too tired to care. As she wavered between dream and reality, she heard the rustling of clothes and sensed someone standing before her. Then the soft and warm blanket was back around her shoulders. Belatedly, she realized Clovis had done it as his low and gentle voice echoed in her ear.

"Let us call it a night. Please rest until Miss Annie returns."

Alicia tried to reply but could only make meaningless sounds. She thought she sensed Clovis's wry smile as he looked down at her.

Then a large, warm hand gently stroked through her hair. It felt so pleasant, like a kindly illusion glimpsed in the gap between dream and reality, or a figment of her desires. It wouldn't matter even if this were all just a dream.

Of course, she'd be happy if it were real, but in her dreams, she could be honest with herself. Knowing this would not have happened if she were awake,

she indulged in the feeling.

Alicia smiled, feeling safe and reassured. She must have been quite the sight.

“You’re being unguarded again,” she thought she heard someone grumble, but it no longer mattered. Surrendering herself to the fluffy blanket, Alicia finally slipped into sleep.



A tiny light flickered at the end of the long corridor. It slowly moved closer to Clovis, who was leaning against the magnificent red door with his eyes closed and stopped before him.

“Oh, dear. If you’re out here, Her Highness must be asleep,” Annie commented, a candle glowing orange in her hand. Martha stood beside her, holding a tea set on a silver tray.

“...Yes,” Clovis replied, uncrossing his arms. “She is still on the sofa. I thought of moving her to the bed, but it would be uncomfortable since she is still dressed.” His eyes darted to the closed door before he continued apologetically. “Apologies for chasing you out and getting you to prepare tea. And now, it’ll be troublesome getting Her Highness ready for bed.”

“It’s fine. We expected her to fall asleep mid-conversation anyway,” Martha said.

“Besides, we’ve served the princess for years. Once she’s sleeping deeply, it’s a breeze getting her out of her dress and cleaned up for bed,” Annie added.

Clovis felt relieved when he heard the maids’ confident replies. The princess was in good hands with these two around. With a goodbye, Clovis moved to step past them, but Annie’s voice stopped him in his tracks.

“It’s cold out here; you could have waited inside, you know? Would you like to have some tea with us?”

Martha raised the silver tray invitingly, and the faint trail of steam rising out of the teapot was tempting. However, Clovis shook his head slowly.

“I’m afraid I have to decline today. It isn’t proper for a man to intrude at this time. Please drink it with Her Highness if she wakes.”

“It’s fine. We’re not disturbing her just yet,” Martha explained.

“Ah! Lord Clovis, wait!”

“No need to stand on ceremony~!”

Ignoring the maids’ cries, the adviser quickly made his way along the dark corridor. Without a candle, his path was barely lit by the faint white light of the moon, but he was grateful for the darkness.

He hadn’t turned down the invitation because he was hesitant to join them. The memory of Alicia’s smooth hair still lingered on the fingers of his right hand, along with a floral fragrance.

“I’m only like this with you, Clovis.”

That bell-like voice made Clovis sigh as he ran a hand down his face. Her unguarded expression and honest words were too much for him to take.

Someone like you, with someone like me.

Clovis placed a hand over his lips, muffling a groan. The deep darkness of the night moonlight hid his turmoil and red cheeks. Only the round moon shining in the night sky knew what he was going through.

No one else must know...

Of this small feeling growing within him.

The young man hurried away, melting into the deep blue of the night.



WARM sunlight shone on the vast, well-maintained gardens.

The landscaped lawns. The straight white paths. The flowers planted meticulously so that the gardens looked good in every season. A famous landscape architect had clearly designed the space with great attention to detail.

“It’s really beautiful here.”

Sitting next to Lady Beatrix Crowne, the foreign affairs minister’s wife, Alicia marveled at the spray of water gushing from a golden horse in the center of the fountain.

Beatrix was clad in a cool summer dress and smiled gracefully at Alicia's comment. "Many of our historically important forefathers held meetings right here in the gardens. It is my honor to host a tea party for Your Highness at a place like this."

"It is proof of the great trust Her Majesty has in Lady Beatrix. Without you, Her Majesty would have had such a tough time finding someone to plan this party."

"Oh, Charlotte. You've such a way with words, putting me on the spot like that. It's going to get to my head."

The wind whistled through the air, and the spray from the fountain glistened in the sun. Baked pastries and a tea set were laid out on a garden table covered with white lace, set up in the shade of a building in an ancient architectural style. Around the table were tea party hostess Lady Crowne, visiting guest Princess Alicia, the young Erdalian princesses, and...

"Erm... May I call you Charlotte as well?"

"Of course! I'd love that!" Charlotte Yggdrasil trilled, face glowing with joy.

Faced with her innocent smile, Alicia felt uneasy, but it couldn't be helped. One just had to take a wider look at the gardens to see the table surrounded by knights from both countries, standing guard just out of earshot. However, Beatrix didn't let the tense atmosphere get to her and gracefully brought the teacup to her smiling lips.

"It's a friendly tea party just for us ladies, so everyone, please enjoy yourselves."



THERE were two reasons why Beatrix Crowne was hosting this tea party.

The first reason was to strengthen the relationship between Alicia and the Erdalian royal family, whom she had never met prior to this visit. Aside from Crown Prince Fritz, Empress Elizabeth had four other children: two boys and two girls. Just like how the empress and Fritz only met Alicia for the first time a few days ago, the other royal children had never seen the Heillander princess before. The presence of the two young princesses today was a tactic to bring

Alicia closer to the family.

The second reason was to make Alicia feel less wary of Beatrix and Charlotte, who would be hosting her for the rest of the visit. The empress wanted to judge if Alicia was worthy of being heir to Heiland's throne, so it was obvious that the two ladies would be reporting back to her on Alicia's actions and behavior.

Oh well, at least I'll have a chance to learn more about her.

Pretending to look at some chirping birds, Alicia stole a glance at Charlotte. She was currently filling Liliana's, the younger of the twin princesses, plate with pastries while the girl looked on with sparkling eyes.

Alicia's black-haired adviser had reminded her many times to keep her distance from Charlotte and stay aware of how things were developing. However, Alicia had no intention of just sitting by idly.

What can I do here?

Doing her best to pretend to be thoroughly enjoying the tea party, Alicia remained on edge, her bright eyes scanning for an opportunity. Just then, a young and innocent voice broke through her thoughts.

"Hey, big sister Cia, when will you and big brother Fritz get married?"

"Huh?!"

Alicia almost spat out her tea. That was close. She almost humiliated herself and ruined the good image of Heiland's royalty. Still reeling, Alicia turned towards Laurencia, the older twin princess, and forced a smile.

"I'm sorry, Laurencia, but His Highness and I are not in that kind of relationship."

"But you two are bound by the threads of fate. Isn't that so, Lili?"

"Lala is right. That's what Mother and all the ladies-in-waiting say."

"Exactly!"

The princesses nodded in unison and placed their chins in their hands, looking towards the stunned Alicia with expectant gazes. Alicia was at a loss for words.

It was a stretch, but was this part of Empress Elizabeth's plan? Was she trying

a roundabout method and using her innocent daughters to change Alicia's mind, secretly creating a trap that would bind her into marriage...

Assailed by suspicion and paranoia, Alicia realized this was the opportunity she'd been waiting for. She hastily looked over at Charlotte. If Charlotte had hidden feelings for Crown Prince Fritz, she'd definitely be upset at the young princesses' comments. She might be great at hiding her emotions, but this would surely make her lose her cool, even just a little.

Or that was what Alicia thought.

"That's right, Your Highnesses Lili and Lala. Her Highness Alicia and His Highness Fritz make such a great pair!"

"I know!"

"Look, even Charlotte agrees with us!"

"Exactly!"

Alicia almost fell off her chair at the sight of Charlotte agreeing with the princesses with nothing but a peaceful smile.

"Is...that so?" she managed to croak out.

Does she really feel nothing for Fritz...?

Was that mistress held so protectively in the arms of the king in her previous life just an illusion?

Beatrix, who had mistaken Alicia's bewilderment for shyness over the topic of marriage, came to her rescue by distracting the persistent princesses. Meanwhile, Alicia couldn't tear her gaze away from Charlotte, hoping to catch the slightest change in her expression, but the girl remained pleasant and good-natured.

Having had their fill of tea and pastries, the twin princesses suggested everyone take a stroll through the gardens, hoping to bring Alicia to see their favorite rose garden. It was impossible to turn down the excited princesses' lovely offer, especially when Beatrix added that now was the perfect time to view the roses. With that, the group moved leisurely toward the gardens.

"Careful, Your Highnesses. Slow down, or you may trip and fall." Beatrix

gently chided the twins, hurrying after them as they chased after some butterflies. However, the two girls were in a playful mood.

“Lala will help Lili if she falls.”

“And Lili will comfort Lala if she falls.”

“Exactly!”

Alicia’s face relaxed into a smile at the sight of the girls puffing out their chests with pride. However, she tensed up again, remembering that the one so bound to her by destiny was walking along by her side.

“Aren’t they cute? Her Highnesses Lili and Lala are so close, they’re never seen apart,” Charlotte shared with a smile, squinting in the early summer sunshine.

“I-I see...”

Belatedly, Alicia realized she’d been given the rare chance to speak with Charlotte alone. She turned towards the other girl, so close to herself in age. She was a lovely girl. Her features were by no means gorgeous, but her large, lively eyes and honest, bright smile that resembled a summer bloom made her very attractive.

This smile suited her much better than the tense expression she’d worn in her previous life.

“...Are you close to the princesses, Charlotte?”

“Hmm?”

“Y-You referred to them by their nicknames.”

Was her question too intrusive and uncomfortable for Charlotte? For a moment, Alicia panicked, but Charlotte didn’t seem offended. In contrast, her expression lit up as if she were happy that Alicia was talking to her.

“I know it’s presumptuous for someone like me to address Her Highnesses in that manner... But I see them often because of Lady Beatrix. That’s why Her Highnesses do not mind me being a little informal.”

Being greatly trusted by the empress, Beatrix often visited the castle to help

out with the princes and princesses. Having traveled to numerous diplomatic forums with her husband, Foreign Affairs Minister Crowne, she was certainly the best tutor for the royal children.

Charlotte also had many chances to interact with the royal children because of her father's position as chancellor. After Beatrix took her under her wing, Charlotte had many more opportunities to visit the castle. That was why she'd grown close to the Princesses Liliana and Laurencia.

"How about His Highness Fritz?" Alicia couldn't help but ask, but Charlotte laughed.

"No way! I'm afraid I'm nowhere near close to His Highness."

"But why? Don't you get to see him often too?"

"That's true, and we do talk sometimes, but..." Charlotte crossed her arms and stared into the sky, pondering Alicia's question in all seriousness. "No one can truly sense what His Highness is thinking..." she muttered before her face turned pale, and she clapped her hands over her mouth. "Oh!"

Her comments could be seen as a show of disrespect toward the crown prince, and it didn't help that she'd spoken them to a visiting guest, a royal princess no less.

But the sight of a flustered Charlotte finally set Alicia's heart at rest. The girl was good-natured, and from their conversation, Alicia could tell she was smart as well. However, she was definitely not cunning enough to play any tricks.

Perhaps Alicia could trust her after all.

Alicia reached out and gently pulled on Charlotte's hands, hoping to calm her. Then, pretending to admire some blooming flowers, she moved closer so that her lips were by Charlotte's ear.

"Don't worry. The knights are too far away, and Lady Beatrix is occupied with the princesses. Your words are safe with me."

"B-But—"

"I'm not going to tell anyone, not even Lady Beatrix. But in exchange, I'd like to know more about you and His Highness Fritz."

Charlotte stared at her wide-eyed as Alicia smiled teasingly, placing a finger against her lips.

“I trust that you can keep this a secret between us?”

“Your Highness...”

...Charlotte’s cheeks had turned red as if she’d fallen in love, but Alicia chose not to acknowledge it. The most important thing was she now had a valuable informant within Erdal.



THE fresh greenery shone brightly under the early summer sun, making the colorful roses in full bloom appear even more gorgeous. Charlotte had calmed down as she took a deep breath of the fragrance of the small red roses.

“It may be hard to guess what His Highness is thinking, but he is a kind person.”

Charlotte recounted a story from her childhood when she’d accompanied her father, Eric Yggdrasil, to the castle for the first time. Back then, the ladies-in-waiting were busy with the newborn twin princesses, so someone was needed to keep Crown Prince Fritz and the other royal children company.

The children of the officials who served the empress were selected for the task. While Charlotte didn’t know many details, she remembered a tutor saying it would be a good experience for the royal children to interact with peers their age.

Charlotte, who was seven years old then, was selected as having the potential to become the venerable playmate of the crown prince. About ten children of various officials were selected and invited to Kingsley Castle.

That was when she first met Crown Prince Fritz.

“What kind of child was His Highness?” Alicia asked.

“Oh, my! He was really so cute!” Charlotte’s voice was bright as she recounted the past. “It was crazy that such a beautiful child could even exist. He had such long lashes, even longer than mine. I wasn’t the only one; all the other kids were shocked to meet His Highness.”

Then Charlotte's eyes clouded over.

"But His Highness never smiled. I thought he might have been angry, but that wasn't the case. He would ignore us when we tried to talk to him and wasn't interested in anything we did. We were all kids ourselves, so we didn't know what to do."

If Charlotte was seven, then the crown prince would have been ten years old, which meant this took place a year before Clovis and Robert came to Erdal for their inspection. She recalled Clovis talking about the times he saw Crown Prince Fritz and how he described him as a beautiful doll.

Naturally, the children gathered in the castle were perplexed. While becoming the crown prince's playmate sounded prestigious on paper, Fritz didn't seem interested in playing with them. After trying everything, the kids gave up. In the end, many of the children spent their time with the second prince instead of Fritz. Of course, they couldn't ignore him completely, but every time they tried to involve him in their games, he would stay silent, observing everyone with his glass-like eyes.

This situation was disrupted by a chance encounter.

"Actually, I'm not my parents' trueborn."

"Huh?"

Alicia couldn't think of an answer to Charlotte's easy confession, but the latter didn't mind as she continued her story.

"I was adopted. One day, the other kids learned about that and started to ostracize me. I guess I became an outcast overnight."

However, Charlotte was surprisingly accepting of her situation. Perhaps she'd been prepared for this to happen when she came to the castle. Either way, her beloved siblings always welcomed her home, so she never felt lonely. After that, Charlotte spent her time alone lying on the garden lawn every time she visited the castle, chasing after the flowing clouds with her gaze and listening to the voices of birds flying across the distant sky.

On one of these afternoons, the silent and distant Crown Prince Fritz suddenly came to talk to her.



“WHAT are you doing here all alone?”

The endless sky was blue and relaxing. Sprawled on the grass, Charlotte was watching the sky when a boy with shining gold hair leaned over her, blocking her view.

Charlotte let out a small gasp. If the crown prince had smiled at her, she might have actually started screaming, but she was relieved he was as expressionless as always.

“I’m looking at the sky, Your Highness.”

“At the sky? Is that fun?”

“Of course. The sky is amazing.”

Charlotte puffed out her chest, but the crown prince looked confused. Then, with a soft snort, he laid down next to Charlotte.

The wind rustled the grass and pushed the clouds onward. The two children lay silently for a while, observing the ever-changing clouds. Despite not knowing if the crown prince was bored or having fun, Charlotte didn’t think to ask.

After some time, the crown prince spoke again.

“Aren’t you annoyed? Don’t you want to get back at those kids who ostracized you?”

“Well... I don’t think so. That doesn’t sound nice.”

“You’re so easygoing.”

“I have Father and Mother and my big brothers at home, so I don’t feel lonely!”

The crown prince remained silent at Charlotte’s proud statement. Just as she wondered if he was tired of talking to her, she heard a small sigh carried on the wind.

“I’m so envious. This is my home, but I have nowhere to go.”

Charlotte couldn’t help but look over at the sound of that lonely voice, but her view was blocked by the grass swaying in the wind, and she couldn’t see his

face. Not knowing what to do, she turned her eyes back to the sunny sky.

Several white clouds were floating in the blue sky. One of them had the unique shape of a thin thread-like strip extending from a perfectly round shape. It looked familiar, but Charlotte couldn't place it. Then she clapped her hands in delight. The cloud was a tadpole! She remembered how her big brother had caught one from the pond and showed it to her.

The realization refreshed Charlotte.

The sky really was the best. All the hardships in the world could dissolve inside a fluffy cloud. As she lay mindlessly on the grass, she suddenly wondered if the crown prince needed to look up at the sky too. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed like a great idea.

"Your Highness. Please look up at the sky with me."

"Huh?" Fritz asked as he sat up. His expression was mostly neutral, but Charlotte sensed some suspicion from him. "I'm already looking, aren't I?"

"Not only now, but in the future as well."

"Why?"

"Because it's good to look at the sky, and it's more fun if there are two of us looking together. So, please look up at the sky with me. Please do it, Your Highness!"

"Really...?"

"Really!"

Charlotte had stood up and nodded vigorously, and the crown prince's eyes widened. Those eyes, framed by long lashes, slowly blinked once, then twice... Then the crown prince smiled.

At that moment, he looked like a normal, innocent ten-year-old boy.



"**I'M** sure His Highness called me strange, and I don't remember how I responded; I was so shocked to see him smiling."

The red and yellow roses swayed in the wind, their soft fragrance tickling

Alicia's nose. Charlotte smiled as she looked up at the fluffy white clouds, just as she did when she was a child.

"Of course, His Highness never promised me anything. But after that day, I was suddenly accepted among the other children again and lost my chance to lie down in the gardens by myself... His Highness also became busier, and the invitations for us to visit slowly stopped."

And that was the only time she'd ever seen Fritz's innocent smile.

"Back then, I had no idea what His Highness was suffering from or what made him so lonely. But now, I think I understand. Maybe you have experienced the same thing yourself too, Your Highness."

"Me?"

Charlotte nodded at Alicia's surprise. Then Alicia turned her gaze to the sky as well. Thinking back on her life, everything changed for her when she was ten. The most important moments were when she regained partial memories of her previous life and when she appointed Clovis as her adviser. She wondered what she would be like now had those two incidents never occurred.

Just the idea of it made her uneasy. Before regaining her memories, Alicia had only valued having fun in life, disregarding the fact she was the only blood relative of the current king. Of course, wanting to have fun wasn't a bad thing in itself, but Alicia knew deep in her heart that that wasn't her issue.

She had been running away. From the kingdom, the citizens, and the burden of the future. And without anyone to reprimand her, she'd gotten away with it. It didn't help that everyone spoiled her rotten.

Alicia nodded at the sky in understanding. The burden of being a royal princess was so heavy that it pushed her to lead a carefree, selfish life.

So, what had it been like for Crown Prince Fritz?

Unlike Alicia, Fritz had always been the undisputed and legitimate heir to Erdal's throne because of his gender. Furthermore, his mother was a well-known empress. His father, who could have provided some comfort, was, unfortunately, king of a faraway land, and Fritz only saw him two or three times every year.

As the son of an empress feared by all, Fritz would have been under enormous pressure as her heir.

He couldn't run.

He couldn't shirk the responsibility.

His days would be piled high with suffocating expectations.

"His Highness isn't as emotionless as he once was, but I still think he needs to take time to look up at the sky," Charlotte said. "If only there were someone who would do it with him."

"Someone? How about yourself?" Alicia suggested.

"No way! His Highness and I live in different worlds. It's hard to believe that we used to lie in the grass side by side. Besides, Father is looking for a match for me now, and it looks like things will be decided soon."

"Really?!"

"Yes. Once the engagement is decided, I won't be able to visit the castle so frequently anymore, so I'll hardly have the time to meet with His Highness, busy as he is." Charlotte giggled, the bright sky reflecting in her doe eyes. "But I do wonder. What could have happened if I had turned down the other kids' invitations and dragged His Highness out to see the blue sky? Would it make him smile the way he did then?"

Alicia was sure Charlotte hadn't meant to let that last part slip, but she let it slide. Charlotte herself also fell silent.

But Alicia now understood.

Crown Prince Fritz needed someone like Charlotte in his life.



"...**SO** you encouraged her to look out for the crown prince."

"Y-Yes."

Clovis sighed deeply and rubbed his temple at Alicia's timid nod.

The tea party in the gardens was over, and everyone was busy preparing for the evening banquet. Thanks to Annie and Martha's efficiency, Alicia was

already dressed, her hair was done, and she was now waiting for someone to escort her to the banquet.

In the meantime, she told Clovis about her conversation with Charlotte, leaving out some parts. At first, the adviser listened to her quietly, then slowly sank his head into his hands.

“Your Highness, I thought I advised you to keep your distance from her until I finished my investigations?”

“I guess, perhaps, you might have told me?”

“I did.”

Despite her teary gaze, Clovis didn't cut her any slack. Sensing he was upset, Alicia hurriedly apologized as her adviser looked at her, disappointed.

“But I could sense that she's not a bad person?”

“But Your Highness is still keeping something from me. I can't make a true judgment like this.”

“I can't help it. I promised Charlotte that I wouldn't tell anyone.”

“...Your loyalty is truly admirable.”

Clovis sighed again, but Alicia couldn't break her promise, not when she only just gained Charlotte's trust. No matter how unhappy Clovis looked at the fact that she was keeping secrets from him, she wouldn't give in this time!

Perhaps sensing that the conversation was devolving into an argument, Clovis gave up and shook his head. “Fine. I'll trust Your Highness, but while you can ask for information from Lady Charlotte, please refrain from letting her know too much about yourself.”

Alicia nodded solemnly at Clovis's insistence. At that, the adviser finally let go of his anger.

“So, does that mean Lady Charlotte and His Highness are not in any special kind of relationship now?”

“That's what I think. We were all older when the revolution happened, so maybe they haven't had the chance to fall in love yet.”

See, I got some useful information.

Despite her pleading gaze, her adviser looked unconvinced. He was still too upset to praise his beloved mistress for taking such risks. Clearing his throat, he switched topics.

“I have something to report too. Lady Charlotte told you that she was adopted. In fact, Chancellor Yggdrasil does not have any trueborn children of his own.”

“Huh? But Charlotte said that she has older brothers...”

“Lord Yggdrasil does have four sons and a daughter, but all were adopted.”

Alicia was shocked. Clovis turned to look out the window with narrowed eyes as if thinking of the city of Kingsley lying beyond the gardens.

“Erdal may be at the peak of prosperity now, but there was a period of turmoil before the ascension of Empress Elizabeth.”

According to Clovis, the former emperor was a rather conservative thinker, ruling in an era when the power of the central government was weakening. Back then, the feudal lord system was still in place. Domestic politics were turbulent as each lord did as they pleased to retain their authority.

Afraid of being replaced by the upcoming merchant class, the nobles worked to oppress them by imposing high taxes. To make matters worse, the empire suffered from a long bout of bad weather, leading to bad harvests and starvation for many citizens.

Heiland tried to extend a helping hand after learning of their neighbor's plight. James's father, King Henry VII, was married to the Erdalian princess, Catherine, and wanted to do something to ease his queen's distress.

However, the situation only worsened through the years, and the emperor soon fell ill from chronic anxiety, leading to rumors that this might be the end of Erdal. It was in the midst of such turmoil that Beatrix, worried about the future of the empire, supported the young Empress Elizabeth to ascend to the throne.

Intelligent, quick-witted, and motivational, the new empress quickly demonstrated her prowess upon her ascension. She focused on helping the

central government regain its power from the noble lords and rescued the impoverished people of Erdal. As a result, Elizabeth quickly gained the enthusiastic support of the empire's farmers, merchants, and low-ranking nobles.

Through a series of imposed reforms, the empress did away with the noble lords and their oppressive ways, allowing the merchants to trade freely. The government also standardized the education system, putting in place regulations so that everyone, no matter how impoverished, could learn the basics of reading and writing. This, in turn, revitalized many poorer regions.

"Now that Empress Elizabeth's reforms have come to fruition, child abandonment has become a problem of the past, but that wasn't the case when Lady Charlotte was born," Clovis concluded.

"I see... The chancellor must be a good man to take in abandoned children and raise them as his own."

Alicia's expression softened as she thought of the thin chancellor, who looked worn out compared to Chief Adviser Nigel Otto, who was of similar age. Next to the golden empress he served, Erdalian Chancellor Eric Yggdrasil was a somber man. However, before he became chancellor, he was well-known even in foreign countries and a leading candidate for heir to the throne next to Elizabeth.

Empress Elizabeth's ascension to the throne was unique since she was an illegitimate child and the youngest princess with three older brothers and two older sisters. In fact, her older sister, the second princess, was betrothed to Eric, heir of Erdal's old and prestigious House Yggdrasil.

Normally, it would be unthinkable for a non-royal like Eric Yggdrasil to be a candidate for succession to the throne. However, the nobles who opposed Elizabeth touted him as a dark horse and pitted him against her.

But Yggdrasil chose to step out of the race in the end, ceding the throne to Elizabeth. The two met for three days before reaching an agreement, with Yggdrasil declaring his support for Elizabeth as the next empress.

No one had been allowed into the room while the two were deep in discussion, so the contents of their talk remained a mystery. The only sure thing

was that when they emerged at the end of the three-day discussion, they came out as Erdal's new empress and her chancellor.

Since then, Yggdrasil had supported the empress in all her endeavors.

At first glance, it would seem like Yggdrasil was a cunning character with an ulterior motive. However, he was just a thin gentleman with a calm air. When he started adopting abandoned children, everyone's opinion of him completely changed.

"He is a good man; extremely intelligent but humble. During our time in the inspection squad, he taught us youngsters many things," Clovis recalled, voice tinged with nostalgia.

Unable to conceive children with his wife, Yggdrasil heavily supported numerous orphanages. The children he adopted also came from these places, personally selected by Yggdrasil when he toured the facilities.

"Using his position as chancellor, he has also helped many children find work with merchants or at government offices. In short, he is a very generous man."

"Wow. You're very impressed by the chancellor, aren't you?"

"Please don't tell Lord Nigel that. He'll be upset to know I'm singing the praises of a foreign chancellor." Clovis smiled wryly, a little embarrassed.

The Eric Yggdrasil that Clovis knew was a sensible chancellor, serving as a mediator for the empress, who was used to forcing her ideas onto others. Thus, even the conservatives, who were not on good terms with the empress, got along well with the chancellor.

Would such a kind and wonderful chancellor really allow his own daughter to become the crown prince's mistress? Even if the two were in love, it would be folly to allow her to follow the crown prince to Heiland. If word got out, the citizens of Heiland would become even less welcoming of King Fritz, potentially triggering a revolution.

Then Clovis gasped as a possibility occurred to him.

What if the backlash from the Heillanders was the goal all along? What if rubbing everyone the wrong way and deepening feelings of hatred was a ploy

to create a reason for Erdal to attack Heilland?

The adviser shook his head. It was too dangerous a thought...

A knock sounded on the door, and Clovis pulled himself away from his thoughts and met Alicia's eyes. It was Robert, here to escort the princess to the banquet.



THE banquet was splendid.

Dresses fluttered as ladies danced to light tunes, and laughter echoed in ripples. Servers weaved between the guests to keep everyone's glasses filled, and the sweet aroma of wine hung in the air.

Honestly, Alicia was prepared for a banquet hosted by the mighty Erdal to be over the top and very pompous, but that couldn't be further from the truth. The music was light and easy on the ears, and the hall was decorated elaborately but warmly to create a cozy atmosphere. Despite being held in a luxurious castle, the banquet felt more like a festival in the city.

It was just what Alicia liked, but...

Everyone's staring too much...

Everyone, from ladies with their faces half-hidden behind fans to gentlemen engaged in banter with each other, was staring curiously at her. Alicia was used to public events, but so many curious eyes still made her uncomfortable.

And for good reason.

"When will the wedding be held?"

"She is already here in Erdal, so it'll be very soon."

"Perhaps they are planning to announce their engagement tonight."

Why is everyone acting like the marriage has been decided?!

Tired of the whispered conversations of the guests, Alicia trembled.

"Here, Alicia."

Suddenly, a thin glass was held before her eyes. Looking up from the clear

amber liquid, she met the dark green gaze of Fritz, her partner for the evening.

“Thank you.”

“Come, let us drink,” Fritz offered with a smile, lifting his glass and clinking it lightly against hers.

The crown prince took a sip of his wine, unfazed by the voices whispering around them. He must’ve been aware of what everyone was saying, yet he seemed so unbothered that Alicia felt impressed. Looking at her, Fritz tilted his head.

“You seem tense tonight. Is something bothering you?”

“Oh, no. That’s not the case...”

Alicia shook her head. She couldn’t tell him the truth—that the marriage rumors were upsetting her. However, the crown prince’s dark green eyes narrowed as if he could read her tumultuous thoughts.

Then he picked up a strand of Alicia’s blue hair and kissed it.

“Erm...?” Alicia couldn’t help but stare at the crown prince, who only chuckled. “What are you doing?” she asked with a mild glare.

“Getting your attention because you keep looking elsewhere.”

The crown prince crossed his arms, calm and composed. His thoughtlessness annoyed Alicia more.

“I am your partner this evening. Rather than look around at others, I’d like you to pay more attention to me.”

Fritz remained unapologetic, and Alicia found herself unable to come up with any response. More whispered words sounded in her ears again.

“Oh! Look how close they are.”

“His Highness must be keen to have the princess as his consort.”

Alicia’s gaze whipped back to the crown prince again, but his expression hadn’t changed.

Could he be putting on a show...?

Alicia was convinced of it. This was a performance for the public's benefit. He was being friendly with her, humoring those who wished for them to marry. Her guard now up, Alicia surreptitiously tried to place some distance between herself and the crown prince, but before she could succeed:

"Come. Lady Crowne is asking for you."

Catching sight of something outside the large, open glass windows, Fritz placed a hand on Alicia's lower back and started walking.

Unable to shake Fritz off, she could only allow herself to be led down the terrace and into the gardens. Following a path lit by candles, they soon arrived at a tent decorated with numerous white cloths.

A group of people were seated around a long table, engaged in conversation. One of the ladies stood up and waved to them.

"Good evening, Princess Alicia. Your dress this afternoon was beautiful, but this one suits you even better."

"Lady Beatrix!"

Relieved, Alicia approached the lady, who beckoned her over with a smile. The candlelight made it hard to discern the faces of the other guests at the long table, but she felt that trying to join them would be easier than being trapped alone with Fritz.

Or that was what she thought.

"Oh, Alicia. I see you've decided to join us."

"Y-Your Majesty!"

Alicia jumped at the low voice of the woman seated next to Beatrix. Turning her head in a hurry, she saw the empress leaning back in her chair, looking up at Alicia with interest. She was seated with her back to the castle, so Alicia hadn't noticed her until now.

"My apologies. I hadn't thought that Your Majesty would be here, and—"

"Relax. It's such a pleasant evening." The empress interrupted Alicia's apology with an impatient wave, then glanced down at the empty seat next to her...as if silently ordering Alicia to sit.

“May I join Your Majesty?” Alicia asked with a smile.

“Of course. Fritz, you too.”

“Thank you.”

Beatrix happily ushered the two royals into seats next to the empress. Sneaking a glance at Fritz, he seemed calm, which meant he might have planned to bring her here all along.

Her eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. She now saw Chancellor Yggdrasil seated on the other side of the empress, and Charlotte seated across from him. Casting her gaze even further, her eyes widened as she caught sight of familiar black hair.

“Clovis? What are you doing here?”

“I invited Lord Cromwell. We got to talking about many things, and I got excited. I apologize for dragging him out here.”

Clovis stood and bowed respectfully while Lord Yggdrasil answered with an apologetic frown. Casually placing her chin in her hand, the empress’s lips lifted in a charming smile.

“What great timing, Alicia. I’ve been trying to get your adviser to tell us more about your resounding success, but let’s hear from you instead. I’m interested to learn about that company you established.”

“It is amazing. Everyone here is so interested in the Mercurius Company. Please tell us more.”

“Exactly! I’d love to hear about how you created such a splendid company.”

“I hope this is not too much to ask.”

Charlotte’s voice bubbled excitedly as her eyes sparkled in the flickering candlelight. Faced with such overwhelming enthusiasm, Alicia found herself not knowing how to react.

“I’m interested too.”

While her attention had been elsewhere, the crown prince had leaned close to Alicia, whispering in her ear like a lover. Startled by his sweet and charming

voice, Alicia flinched and turned around to meet Fritz's narrowed eyes, framed by lashes as long as a woman's.

"If you don't mind, I wish to learn more about you," he said, a smile on his handsome face.

But Alicia was confused.

...Why is he so different?

The image of Fritz running away with Charlotte was burned into her mind. Their situation might be different now, but the gap between that Fritz and this one was just too big.

It was, honestly, very creepy.

Despite being likened to an angel or messenger of the gods, Alicia was not charmed by Crown Prince Fritz. But there was one person who disliked him much more than her.

"Your Highness's passion is making my mistress nervous. The wonderful portraits sent by Her Majesty really do not do you justice."

Clovis's smile was slightly strained as he spoke to the crown prince, but Alicia saw through him. Clovis was definitely not smiling inside. He was upset, his anger boiling beneath his flawless, handsome face. His unexpected reaction made Alicia's head hurt.

Why are you so angry...?

"Lord Cromwell is right, but I'm glad to see that the Highnesses seem to have grown close so quickly," Lady Crowne said with a smile.

"I know. Her Highness is so amazing!" Charlotte chimed in, her eyes shining with respect and admiration.

Crown Prince Fritz being so uncharacteristically sweet. Charlotte strangely entranced by her every action. And on top of that, Clovis glaring daggers at the crown prince (that no one else seemed to notice).

Nobody was behaving the way she thought they would.

Alicia's shoulders drooped in defeat.



THE four important characters on the night of the revolution and the ruler of the era, Empress Elizabeth.

Alicia had expected powerful things to happen once everyone was gathered, but nothing happened. Rather, she became so engrossed in discussion with the empress that there was no time for anything else.

Elizabeth was unrelenting in her questioning, responding to Alicia's story with comments such as "That's not right," or "Shouldn't it be like this instead?" Alicia fought back hard, elaborating on the company's mission, Heiland's system, and even prospective international relations.

After a heated discussion that left both parties exhausted, Beatrix clapped her hands in admiration.

"Wow! It's been a long time since I've seen Her Majesty engage in such passionate conversation."

"We're not playing around, Auntie. I'm giving this clueless girl a lecture," Empress Elizabeth sulked as she glanced at Alicia while fanning herself in a tired and annoyed manner. "A kingdom where the ruler and citizens stand side-by-side? My cousin and his daughter are truly being overly optimistic. Listen, you're making a huge mistake if you think the people will follow you just because you wish for it in your heart."

"I know that." Alicia pushed aside her fatigue to argue. "But the important thing is that the ruler and citizens must see eye-to-eye. Whether a ruler reigns by themselves or with their people, they have to unite the country. Therefore, I don't think that any one method is wrong."

Alicia took a deep breath, then continued.

"A country where everyone's worth is determined by their ability rather than status or family background. I believe that Your Majesty introduced reforms to create such a society so that the citizens could support you in areas out of your reach. Isn't that also one of the ways in which a ruler and the people stand side by side?"

Stunned, the empress stared at Alicia. Then, after a moment, she laughed, all

signs of tiredness gone from her demeanor.

“Did you hear that, Yggdrasil? The reasoning is forced, but strangely persuasive. Has anyone ever been so tenacious in opposing me?”

“She really has done a good job, Your Majesty. I’d have to give her this round.”

The Erdalian chancellor nodded with a smile as the empress laughed happily. Alicia was relieved that the long discussion had finally come to an end as she fought against the urge to collapse from exhaustion.

From the moment she sat down, Alicia hadn’t spoken to anyone aside from the empress. Elizabeth had been so keen on making conversation that she couldn’t even try to escape. Despite not being the host, Alicia felt slightly guilty. The chancellor, who watched the entire discussion with a smile, was probably fine, but wasn’t it rude to exclude the other guests from the conversation? Alicia looked around the table until her eyes landed on her adviser.

Clovis was speaking to Charlotte, who was seated next to him. Perhaps he didn’t want to interrupt the passionate discourse between the empress and Alicia, as he was speaking so softly that Alicia couldn’t make out any words.

However, Charlotte seemed to be enjoying herself greatly as she listened to Clovis. Her lovely smile and rapt attention were cute, and her giggles sounded as sweet as bells. Clovis was also smiling as he spoke, his expression so gentle.

...Didn’t he warn me to be careful when speaking to her?

“What’s the matter? Is something bothering you?”

“Oh, no!”

Alicia gasped as Fritz’s voice pulled her from her musings. Perhaps hearing her voice, Clovis was also looking over at her now. Not wishing to let her adviser know she’d been staring, Alicia forced herself to come up with a topic.

“Erdal’s banquets are so wonderful. There’s no stiff formality, and everyone appears so relaxed.”

“Her Majesty will be glad to hear you say that, Your Highness. Banquets in the castle became so cozy only after Her Majesty became empress,” Lady Crowne

answered.

“Is that so?”

“Yes!”

Beatrix nodded happily, but the empress narrowed her eyes as she tried to recall the past.

“The people who attend these banquets have changed because of my reforms,” she finally said with a shrug. “Many of my invitees are people deemed too lowly to visit the castle, but they are the ones who should be rewarded for their tireless contributions to the empire. That’s why I decided that my banquets should be held to honor them... And a luxurious, classy banquet isn’t going to entertain them.”

“Hehehe. Her Majesty may be strict, but she is kind to those who serve her well.”

“It’s not kindness. An occasional treat is needed to keep people motivated, which benefits me. Nothing more than that.”

“There you go with those hurtful words again. That’s not very nice.”

The empress frowned slightly at Beatrix’s teasing, then tilted her head back and swallowed the rest of the wine in her glass. The whole exchange was surreal for Alicia.

Empress Elizabeth was known to be fierce and ruthless, so to hear of her treating her subjects with kindness was surprising. Alicia had been so sure that the empress was a character who cared nothing for those around her.

And that wasn’t the only surprise. Famous for her heavy-handed policies, Alicia assumed that the empress would push ahead with reforms without regard to the morale of her subjects. However, judging from Beatrix’s words and their discussion, it seemed Elizabeth had done her due diligence, and everyone who supported her reforms did so wholeheartedly.

Perhaps, as the empress said, she knew how to work the carrot and stick. Even so, there was much to be learned from her method of accomplishing reforms by winning over the hearts of her people. At that moment, Alicia felt a

deep kinship with Elizabeth.

That might have been the most surprising discovery of all.

“...Well, we’ve talked about various issues...”

A server was refilling Elizabeth’s glass with wine while she watched on. Her voice was soft but strangely resonant, and even those seated at the end of the table turned to listen. The table was silent as the empress lifted her dark green gaze to meet Alicia’s, her red lips lifting in a small smile.

“So young, and as foolish as my cousin, but your broad perspective and courage are worthy of admiration. I knew it was right to invite you here... You have impressed me. How would you like to become my son’s consort?”

A light breeze picked up, making the candles flicker.

“That’s a great idea, Your Majesty,” Fritz quickly answered. “I was sure from the first moment I saw her that she was the one I would love.”

“Please wait.”

It was Clovis, his expression stiff as he interrupted the crown prince’s sweet confession. The gentle smile had disappeared as he stood, taking on his role as an adviser as he looked straight at the empress.

“I apologize for my rudeness. However, King James repeatedly declined the offer of marriage between Their Highnesses. I’m afraid this is not a matter that should be discussed in His Majesty’s absence.”

“I am aware.”

“But—”

“Silence.”

The empress flicked her fan shut, and Clovis fell silent, as told.

“You’ve shown great promise since your time in the inspection squad, so I will forgive this now, but remember: I loathe people who do not listen,” she spat with a sharp glare.

Alicia’s heart trembled at the empress’s voice, cold enough to freeze the air. Then the charming smile was suddenly back on her face as she leaned against

the armrest of her chair.

“But do not worry. I am just concerned as a mother. Here is a girl of the right age; of course, I’d want to play matchmaker for my son. It’s all in the name of fun, so there’s no need to get upset.”

“...I apologize.”

Clovis lowered his gaze as he sat down meekly. Despite his calm exterior, Alicia could tell he was still worried about his mistress. She tried to signal to him with her eyes.

Don’t worry. I’ll handle it somehow.

“Alicia, I’d like to hear it from you. How do you feel about me?”

Steeling herself, Alicia turned to see the beautiful Fritz smiling sweetly at her. She focused her mind and looked back at Fritz, trying to discern the truth within the deepest depths of him. Finally, she saw it.

There was no love for her in those dark green eyes.

“...I’d like to speak with you.”

“Oh? I’m glad to hear that. What would you like to talk about?”

Resting his chin lightly on one hand, Fritz looked at Alicia with a teasing smile, but she remained unfazed as she spoke clearly.

“Many things, Your Highness. But I’d like us to speak alone, just the two of us.”



SHORTLY after her request, Alicia found herself alone with Fritz in the rose garden. Lanterns had been placed here and there to illuminate the blooming roses in case any guests wanted to take a stroll there. The decorative lights gave the garden a different feeling than when she visited it with the twin princesses that afternoon, and Alicia couldn’t help but be captivated by its beauty.

“I’m surprised. I didn’t expect you to propose an escape,” Fritz said.

“I hope Her Majesty won’t take offense?”

“It’s fine. Mother did seem rather amused by your request, though.”

With that, Fritz led her to the large dome in the center of the rose garden that resembled a bird cage, inviting her to sit on the bench inside.

“So, what is it that you want to ask of me? It must be something important for you to drag us all the way out here.”

“That...may be the case.”

The wind blew through the roses blooming in the darkness of night, bringing with it a soft, sweet scent. Alicia raised her face and stared at Crown Prince Fritz, whose skin appeared so pale in the moonlight. She could understand why she'd fallen for him in her previous life. The smile directed at her now was sweet, as if filled with genuine affection, and the words spilling from his shapely lips would melt anyone's heart.

But...

“We are alone. Her Majesty is not here, and neither is my adviser,” Alicia announced. “So let whatever we say next be honest words shared between two people.”

Fritz's eyes narrowed as if he were trying to figure out Alicia's true intentions, but she pressed on, not wanting to give him a chance to direct the conversation away.

“What I want to know, Your Highness, is your true feelings as *Fritz*. You said that I am the one you will love... That was a lie, wasn't it?”

“Is it a lie, though? Of course, there is still so much we have to learn about each other, but you are more beautiful than the rumors suggest and more intelligent than I ever imagined. I can't help but feel that it must be destiny that I get to meet a woman like you.”

“As I said, such flowery words are not necessary here.”

Fritz furrowed his brows in suspicion at her harsh words. “You're pretty stubborn yourself. In fact, you're being very cold. Why are you denying my feelings so vehemently?”

“I'm not doing so without reason. I just know it's impossible for you to fall in love with me.”

“Hmm? Impossible? What makes you say that?”

“Because Your Highness’s heart already belongs to another.”

The moment the words left her lips, Fritz’s face lost all its expressiveness, but only for the briefest of moments. Then that sweet smile that had captured plenty of hearts was back on his face. Alicia rushed to continue before he had a chance to speak.

“Charlotte Yggdrasil.”

It finally worked. Alicia’s fists clenched as she watched Fritz visibly freeze at the sound of that name. He could only look on silently as Alicia repeated her words, carving them into reality.

“Charlotte is the girl you love, Your Highness.”



WHILE Alicia didn’t have any evidence for her inkling that Crown Prince Fritz had a crush on Charlotte, it seemed like the most natural assumption judging from the events of her previous life.

There was no way to determine how Charlotte and Fritz fell in love with each other the last time, but she had two rough guesses. One, they fell in love despite objections from everyone close to them. Two, they came together with the backing of the empress and chancellor for political reasons.

In either case, Crown Prince Fritz truly fell for Charlotte. Even in the second scenario, the crown prince probably wouldn’t have willingly started an affair with another woman when he already had Alicia as his wife unless he already had those feelings in the first place.

And so Alicia had taken a gamble, and it seemed she was right. Hoping to secure a response, she took another bet.

“So it’s true, but there’s no more time. Charlotte told me that she’s going to be engaged soon. If you continue to hide your feelings, she’ll be gone forever. Are you all right with that?”

“No more questions. Tell me what you want.”

Thin clouds scuttered across the sky, obscuring the moon, so the night

darkened as the crown prince quietly stood up. She could barely make out his pale face and the cold light in his narrowed eyes.

The mood had shifted.

Alicia held her breath. Was this the real Fritz speaking? His persona as heir to the Erdalian throne was stripped away, leaving behind an emotionless youth of frozen beauty. Despite it all, he was still thrillingly charming, and it was easy to see that he was Empress Elizabeth's trueborn.

Alicia stood as well, facing the crown prince, who seemed to have become one with the darkness. "I apologize for my rudeness, but what I want to say is that there's no need for us to force ourselves into marriage. Surely we can join hands as rulers and strengthen the bond between our countries without a marriage, right? Won't that be the best solution?"

"In short, you don't plan to marry me. Is that what you want to say?"

Fritz let out a dry huff that sounded like a cough, and it took Alicia a few moments to realize that he was laughing.

Before she knew it, his hand was on her chin, forcing her face up to meet his. A chill ran down her spine at the sight of herself reflected in those emotionless, doll-like eyes. She tried to twist away, but he caught her wrist in a surprisingly strong grip.

"And how about you? Are you going to traipse off into the arms of your true love?"

"I don't know what you're insinuating. I'm doing this for our countries—"

"Is that true now? This may sound pompous, but I know how popular I am with the ladies. If you are rejecting me, there must be someone else in the picture... So, is he a foreign prince or maybe a Heillander noble's son?"

Then Fritz's eyes narrowed as if he realized something.

"I see. It's him, isn't it? That handsome adviser of yours."

A bittersweet feeling rushed through her chest at those words.

It was true that Alicia had been avoiding marriage proposals for Heilland's sake, but there was the issue of her own feelings as well. Confronted with it

now, his face appeared in her mind again. The face of the young man who had chosen to fight for the future by her side.

“But no. It cannot happen.” Fritz shook his head slowly as Alicia struggled to rein in her emotions. “A princess like you and a mere adviser like him. The end of the world will come before anyone will approve of a match like that.”

“That’s—”

“Do you understand? Or do you want to learn it the hard way? If so, then you are foolish. You are a woman, but you are royalty, just like me. We are puppets being prepared to become the next great rulers... And that’s all we are. We are the same.”

Fritz’s next words were whispered like a curse.

“I’m sure we’ll make a good pair. We may not get what we want, but we can understand each other’s pain and suffering and work to stifle the loneliness together... Take my hand, Alicia. That is my command as the emperor of Erdal.”

Fritz’s hand slid down her cheek, and it felt so cold and sorrowful.

“Fall with me.”

She could see the plea in the crown prince’s eyes. But...

“No.”

Alicia slapped Fritz’s hand away and stared right into the crown prince’s eyes with her strong, sky-blue gaze.

Fritz was right. Alicia was born into House Chester, and her duty as Heilland’s princess came before her needs as a woman. However, she refused to lament her circumstances or curse her fate, and that was what set her apart from Fritz.

And it was this fundamental difference that made them incompatible.

“I sympathize with you,” she said. “My father gives me the freedom to do what I want, and there are many who support me, so I know that I have not suffered as much as you have, but...”

The clouds parted then, and the moon lit up the night sky. The pure white moonlight shone down on the princess as she met the crown prince’s gaze with

resolution.

“As Your Highness said, we are royalty. We need to be prepared to shoulder the burden of leading our countries and have wills strong enough to carve out a good future... But you do not have that will yet, and as Heilland’s princess, I can’t accept someone like you as my husband.”

The crown prince’s expression changed for the first time. The anger and humiliation of being rejected twisted his handsome face.

“You...!”

Fritz raised a large hand, but Alicia stood firm. She did not feel fear. She had crossed a line and was willing to accept his anger. She squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the blow.

“Please stop!”

The rose bushes rustled, and a black shadow cut between her and Fritz. Opening her eyes in shock, Alicia saw someone standing before her like a shield, gripping Fritz’s hand tightly.

The crown prince was surprised, too, but not as much as Alicia. Suddenly, all the tension trapped in her body was released, and she felt like sobbing.

How did he always manage to appear whenever she needed him most?

“...Perhaps someone can explain what is going on?”

Clovis was here. She didn’t know how, but it didn’t matter. The adviser threw a worried glance at his mistress before his violet gaze turned back to Fritz.

“Could Your Highnesses explain what is going on here?” he repeated impatiently when Fritz only frowned, and Alicia looked up at them with wide eyes, neither responding.

This was bad. Clovis appeared calm, but his tone sounded harder than usual. She spoke before her worried adviser could offend the crown prince any further.

“Wait! I was the one who spoke rudely to him. Please, let His Highness go.”

“Your Highness...?”

Clovis's violet gaze was full of suspicion as he looked hard at Alicia. Perhaps he was trying to gauge if she was lying to diffuse the situation.

But that made her realize an important thing. Clovis had no idea what they were talking about before he made his appearance. That meant he had noticed their absence at the banquet and came looking, stumbling upon the scene just in time.

"Yes. Please let His Highness go right away. That's an order."

"...We can trust him?"

"Of course."

Clovis narrowed his eyes, but Alicia's strong command convinced him. After a moment, he released Fritz's hand. The crown prince rubbed his wrist as he looked at Clovis with a twinkle in his eye.

"Why are you here, Adviser Cromwell? Her Highness and I were looking to speak in private when we left the table—at her own request, no less. Have you been stalking us this whole time?"



Despite his gentle voice, the crown prince's accusation hung sharply in the air. But before Alicia could open her mouth, Clovis placed a hand on his chest and gave a respectful bow.

"I apologize. I was taking a stroll to cool off in the night breeze and got lost and stumbled upon this place by accident."

"By accident, you say. I'd say it's a little too convenient."

"I was following the sound of voices, so I guess it was a stroke of luck that I managed to protect my mistress from harm."

The tension in the air was thick as the two young men glared at each other. Finally, Fritz was the one to look away.

"Might as well. You stopped me from committing an irreparable act against my esteemed guest. I am grateful for your arrival, but more importantly, Alicia, I'd like to apologize. I am so terribly sorry."

"No, I should be the one asking for forgiveness for my rudeness."

"Let us forget this ever happened... I think it's best if you returned to your room. I will let everyone know you have retired for the night."

"Thank you."

With a final glance at Alicia, as she bowed her head, Fritz turned on his heel.

"Going back to what we spoke about: my feelings have not changed. As long as Her Majesty is keen on our marriage, I will comply with her wishes... But you are free to try to change her mind. If that is even possible."

"...I understand. Thank you for the advice."

Alicia's answer was firm, despite the negativity oozing from Fritz's statement. The crown prince let out a dry laugh again, then straightened his shoulders and stepped into the darkness.

His retreating back seemed lonely and sad.

He was right. They were both born as royals, destined to shoulder the burden of leading their countries. Her determination would do Fritz good, but the loneliness that tormented him would destroy them in the end. They were just

too different.

Their paths were not destined to be woven together in this life nor the last.

Alicia might have been in love with him in her previous life, but she hadn't even understood half of his pain. Now that she did, she knew she couldn't chase after him.

Heart filled with an indescribable feeling, Alicia whispered a goodbye to the retreating crown prince.

She was given a second chance at life, but they were still not meant to be.

It was just fate.

And that was okay.

7. Everyone's Aftermath

NOT long after they parted in the rose garden...

Fritz, crown prince of Erdal, stood like a shadow in a deserted corridor, his face illuminated by the white moonlight.

After leaving Alicia, he returned to the banquet to inform everyone that their guest had retired to her room. Then he announced he would be doing the same and left the area. The empress and her guests were probably still enjoying the dinner feast, but the noise didn't reach him here.

In the silent corridor, cut off from the rest of the world, Fritz stared up at the white moon floating in the indigo sky through the pillars. His upturned gaze wasn't focused on the night sky itself but searched for some hidden answer. Finally, disappointment clouded the crown prince's glass-like eyes as he turned his back to the moon and walked away.

Just then, a girl's voice echoed down the corridor.

"Your Highness! Please wait, Your Highness!"

"...Charlotte?"

The crown prince stopped and turned just as Charlotte reached his side. Fritz looked down at her flowing red hair, waiting as she stopped to catch her breath. Then she held out a white lace handkerchief.

"Father found this in your seat, and I thought it might belong to Your Highness... So I wanted to see if I could catch you to return it."

"Is that why you came running after me?"

"Yes... Oh, I apologize if I seem improper!"

Charlotte looked embarrassed as she imagined herself dashing around in an unladylike manner in her formal dress. Seeing her cheeks tainted scarlet, just like her hair, Fritz shook his head slowly.

“That doesn’t matter... But this.”

“Oh, is it not Your Highness’s after all?”

“It is mine. But don’t you remember?”

The crown prince took the white handkerchief and unfolded it. Charlotte tilted her head, confused. The item seemed somewhat familiar. Then she let out a small scream.

“Can it be? Is this the one I gifted to Your Highness?”

“Yes. You gave it to me when we were kids.”

It was Charlotte’s gift to the crown prince when she was selected to visit the castle as his playmate. Even though he never mentioned it, Charlotte was certain Fritz was somehow responsible for convincing the other children to stop ostracizing her. After discussing things with her father, she gifted him this white handkerchief.

The item in the crown prince’s hands now was the exact gift she’d chosen for him. Charlotte was speechless. It had been more than five years since the incident, and though she’d consulted her parents and done her best to choose the best gift, surely the crown prince had better handkerchiefs that he would rather use?

Nostalgic and happy, Charlotte’s voice was bright as she spoke. “I’m surprised Your Highness still has it. And you have become such a splendid crown prince; it’s hard to imagine we used to spend time together as children.”

“Is that so? I don’t feel that way.”

“But I really do! I thought you looked so wonderful when you stood with Her Highness Princess Alicia just now. Royals really are different from the rest of us.”

“...Is that how you really feel?”

The bitter tone in Fritz’s voice made Charlotte look up in confusion. For the first time, she noticed that the crown prince didn’t seem like his usual self. A shadow clung to his face as he kept it turned away from hers, and the usual mask with its placid smile that hid his true heart from the world was absent.

Charlotte had always kept an eye on the crown prince every time they met out of concern for him, but she'd never seen him look so exhausted.

"Alicia is not like me. She says I've made a mistake, but I assumed she was wrong... Yes, that's what I thought, but I don't know anymore." Fritz shook his head. "I've done the best I could, living up to everyone's expectations and fulfilling my role as the crown prince. But it's no use. No matter what I do, I'm just a shadow of Erdal's great empress, nothing more, nothing less. That's why I tried my best to at least be a good pawn."

"Did something happen? Why is Your Highness speaking this way?"

"I know it better than anyone else. I can't be anyone; I can't even be a puppet. And whenever I think of giving up, my heart croaks and screams... I can't do anything right."

The crown prince's monologue was laced with agony.

Charlotte's mind raced as she stared at Fritz. Did something happen to the crown prince today? He seemed normal when he escorted their guest, Princess Alicia, to the banquet earlier.

As she fumbled for an answer, the crown prince let out a dry laugh and shook his head in apology.

"I'm sorry. What was I thinking, saying all that to you? Please forget it... Thank you for bringing me the handkerchief. It's my treasure."

"P-Please wait, Your Highness!" Charlotte stopped the crown prince before he could turn and leave. "Please don't think that you can't do anything right. Ever since Your Highness was a small child, you've read so many difficult books, mastered martial arts and horsemanship, and worked hard to become Her Majesty's successor. It's a pity that Your Highness cannot see the hard work you've put in."

"...You're wrong. That's not what I meant."

"Then what's wrong? Is it because Her Majesty is a great empress? Are you upset that you cannot be like her?" Charlotte was so angry that she cut the crown prince short, walking up to stand right before the surprised young man. "Listen. I'm not smart like Your Highness, but I know this. You are you, Your

Highness. You cannot be like Her Majesty, but there's no need for that. You are two different people."

"But no one, not even Mother, approves of me. I stand in the great empress's glorious shadow, small disappointments piling up day by day. You won't understand the pain of that burden."

"I don't. I really don't. It's too hard for me," Charlotte confessed as she reached out to grasp the crown prince's hands in her own. "But Her Highness, Princess Alicia, said she wants to become a ruler who stands side-by-side with her people. Her Majesty may be a great empress, but hers is not the only way to rule. Why can't Your Highness work to find your own way to rule?"

"Find my own way to rule? Easier said than done. How am I supposed to do that?"

"We just have to work it out. Seriously! Your Highness is thinking too much. That's why I told you to find more time to look at the sky!"

Suddenly, Charlotte remembered herself and covered her mouth in a panic.

Risking a timid look, she saw Fritz frozen, his dark green eyes wide as he stared at her, at a loss for words. Charlotte felt relieved that the crown prince didn't seem angry, but embarrassment soon took its place as Fritz stared at her. She'd never imagined that they would ever exchange more than simple pleasantries.

Eyes swimming with anxiety, Charlotte timidly withdrew her hands from the crown prince's and stepped back with an awkward smile.

"I guess I should be go—"

"Wait."

Fritz grabbed Charlotte's hand as she turned away. She flinched in surprise, never imagining that the crown prince would hold her back, but Fritz seemed determined to do just that.

"You haven't changed... Still as carefree as ever. I just don't understand."

"Huh...?"

"Is it true that you will be engaged soon?"

The question came out of nowhere. Wondering if she'd misheard, Charlotte was about to turn back when something warm suddenly wrapped around her body.

It took a few long moments before she realized that Fritz was hugging her from behind.

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Your Highness?!"

"I object."

The sorrowful voice that whispered in her ear was so shocking that her mind blanked, and her body froze. The arms around her tightened, and Charlotte felt the crown prince's hard chest against her back.

"I don't want to lose you. The sky without you next to me is terribly dull."

"J-Just what happened today? What's—"

Charlotte twisted her body a little and looked back, hoping to understand Fritz's unusual behavior, but before she could, she felt something warm and soft against her lips. Her eyes widened, and all she could see was the crown prince's delicate long lashes trembling.

She was horribly confused, her mind full of questions. But while Fritz's hold on her was strong as a man's, his hands clung to her like a frightened child, pleading for her not to leave. She knew that pushing him away would hurt him deeply.

And so, she stopped resisting and gave in, closing her eyes.

Silence descended upon the corridor again, where the two stood alone.

The gears of destiny turned, weaving two paths together.



A little while back...

Alicia watched as Crown Prince Fritz disappeared without a single glance back.

Then she endured a severe scolding from Clovis.

To the adviser's credit, this was the first time he'd been so upset with her. The two rarely had any disagreements, and even when Alicia rushed into things as

she had with Charlotte, the worst she received were firm reprimands.

But this was different. The usually calm and loyal adviser had ripped off his mask.

“Seriously, you’re...! I can’t believe you came here all alone, with someone we don’t know we can trust. And as if that wasn’t enough, you provoked him. Do you even understand how dangerous that was?!”

Clovis’s anger descended like a thunderstorm the moment the crown prince disappeared from view. Faced with such a situation for the first time, Alicia was stunned.

“You did the same with Lady Charlotte, jumping in without thinking of the consequences. We’re not in Heiland. All of us would be blamed if anything happened to you!!”

“Erm, I’m really very sorry.”

“I do not want apologies! I want you to realize how carelessly you’ve placed yourself in harm’s way with your actions these past few days. And...!”

Clovis shook his head, frustrated. Unable to say anything to placate her conflicted adviser, Alicia could only watch in dismay as his expression twisted with sorrow.

“...I was so worried.”

It was so soft that she almost didn’t catch it, but it was enough to make Alicia reflect on her actions.

Hoping to make amends, she followed Clovis obediently back to her room and allowed her wound to be treated. She hadn’t noticed it until Clovis pointed it out, but Alicia’s right wrist was red. Perhaps she hurt it when she tried to shake off the crown prince’s grip.

Back in her room, Clovis ordered the maids to prepare a basin of water and told Alicia to soak her wrist in it. Then he sat next to his mistress and stared at her wrist as if making sure that she wouldn’t try to escape.

But it’s just a small bruise that will heal on its own.

Her lips almost lifted in a wry smile at the sight of her serious adviser staring

at her wrist. His overprotective nature was always troublesome to deal with.

But she had worried him. He had probably searched everywhere for her, only to stumble upon the crown prince with his hand raised to hit her. Clovis might be strong, but even he would have been scared to death at that moment. That was why he had tossed aside his position as adviser and reprimanded her fiercely.

After a while, Clovis told her to remove her hand from the basin. He wiped her wet hand dry with a cloth.

“Clovis?”

“What is it?”

“You said that you came upon us by accident because you got lost. Is that true?”

The hand holding the cloth stopped as Clovis glared at Alicia through the glossy black hair obscuring his eyes.

“Do you really need me to spell it out for you?”

“...No. I understand. Thank you.”

Clovis didn't respond, turning his attention back to her wrist. The tension that had enveloped him ever since he appeared in the rose garden finally dissipated, leaving him exhausted.

Annie and Martha tidied up the basin and left the room, leaving Clovis and Alicia alone.

The silence stretched on.

Clovis had sunk back into the sofa with a deep sigh... Alicia felt a little relieved and stole a glance at his tired face.

Crown Prince Fritz was right. No matter how she tried to deny it, Clovis was more and more present in her life every day, and she couldn't ignore it any longer. But a princess like herself and a mere adviser would never be allowed to marry.

Besides, Clovis served her because of his pledge of loyalty and supported her

as a comrade with similar goals. Alicia's feelings would only destroy the relationship they had as mistress and subject, complicating things and bringing him trouble.

Clovis was kind. He would have trouble accepting her feelings and worry about not being able to return them. And that was the last thing she wanted.

After a doubtful moment, Alicia hesitantly laid her head on Clovis's shoulder, leaning slightly onto him. Her adviser shifted but didn't push her away.

"What is it?"

"Can we stay like this, just for a bit?"

"...Yes."

He sounded resigned but also kind.

Alicia closed her eyes. This was enough. It was more than she could ever ask for.

Even if Clovis didn't reciprocate her feelings, he was still her irreplaceable partner in their quest to change the future, held together by a strong, unbreakable bond. She might not be the woman who would one day have his heart, but it wouldn't be presumptuous to say she was still special to him.

To be thought of that way by a person she loved.

That was surely the greatest happiness.

She had to learn to accept that as enough.

"...You don't really have any sense of self-preservation, do you?" Clovis groaned.

Alicia opened her eyes and met her adviser's gaze, which seemed somewhat resentful.

"I've told you before. What if your casual actions and words arouse wicked feelings in a man? You are just too unaware, Your Highness."

"Yes, I remember... But I told you. I'm only like this when I'm with you."

"...Did you allow Crown Prince Fritz to touch you too?"

“Huh?”

Alicia tilted her head, not sure if she heard right.

At that moment, clothes rustled, and the shoulder she'd been leaning against moved away. Alicia looked up to see Clovis's handsome face inches from her own.

His hands gripped the sofa on either side of her head, trapping Alicia so she had nowhere to hide. It was the first time she'd seen her adviser at such a close distance, and it took her breath away.

The expression on his face now was like nothing she'd seen before.

It wasn't the polite facade he put on as an adviser, the friendly face of the young man she'd grown close to, or even the troubled expression that sometimes flitted across his face.

He was silent, but those eyes, burning with heat, pierced straight through her.

“So, you're really only like this with me?”

Alicia remained frozen as Clovis's smile turned grim.

“...But I'm a man too.”

“Clo...vis?”

Her hoarse question was met with silence as Clovis caressed her hair, then her cheek. Her skin burned wherever he touched her, and that heat coursed straight to her heart, leaving her breathless.

The sofa creaked as Clovis leaned forward, and she felt his hot breath against her lips.

A gasp sounded in her ear, and in the next moment, the body over hers was gone. She blinked, confused, and saw her adviser standing with his back to her.

His determination not to face her was evident in the strong line of his back.

“I'll be taking my leave. I will come by tomorrow when you are ready for the day... Please have a good rest.”

Before she could stop him, Clovis had left the room. The sound of the door closing left her frozen in a daze.

After a moment, she slumped against the sofa.

Wh-What was that...?!

Abandoning all pretense, Alicia collapsed into herself, clutching at her heart with both hands as it thundered in her chest.

I think...he kissed me?

She had the impression that it might have happened when Clovis leaned in. To be fair, his handsome face had been so close to hers that it was natural that it had happened.

But Clovis would never do that.

He was her adviser, a man nearly ten years older than her and a beacon of light illuminating her way.

But...

It couldn't be...

"We're back. Shall we help you get ready for bed...? Hmm?"

"What are you doing, Your Highness?"

The two maids who had just returned stared at their mistress with wide eyes. Unable to answer, Alicia could only flail on the sofa, hiding her scarlet cheeks and ears from sight.

Side Story: A Faint Light and Doubt

GLITTERING light bounced about the hall, illuminating it with a golden glow. The orchestra raised their instruments as one, and the vivid tones of a song flowed forth like water.

It was a signal for the guards, who pulled open the large vermilion doors. Clovis, the princess's adviser, who stood in the center of the hall, turned to look. Everyone in the hall knew who would soon make her appearance. Smiling, Clovis looked for the form of his beloved mistress.

But as the light shone on her shining blue hair, his smile stiffened...



“CLOVIS!”

It was afternoon, and Clovis was gazing absentmindedly at the town from the top of the castle when a bright voice called out to him. Turning his head, he saw Alicia hurrying towards him, her blue hair fluttering behind her. Hastily, he placed a hand on his chest and bowed, but the princess just smiled.

“I’m not here on official business, so you can relax. Were you looking at the town? Did you spot anything interesting?”

“No...”

Faced with the princess's innocent questions, Clovis felt lost and unable to answer. While it was true that he'd been gazing in the direction of the town, he hadn't actually been looking at it.

Alicia remained oblivious to his hesitation, turning her gaze to the townscape with a happy laugh. The sun was peeking through the clouds, making the orange and red-roofed buildings of the town and the calm Eram River look like a painting.

She seemed mesmerized by the scenery, but Clovis's eyes were on his mistress. Her sky-blue eyes sparkled, and the closer he felt to the smiling Alicia,

the more his heart ached, just like on that night.

It was the night of the ceremony to celebrate Alicia's sixteenth birthday. That was when Clovis first noticed his own strange thoughts. As the king's only daughter, the kingdom celebrated Alicia's birthday every year. This year was special, with a ball held after the ceremony for Alicia's societal debut.

Clovis had felt uncharacteristically fidgety and restless before the ball. In a way, it felt like he'd been cut loose and was floating.

But it couldn't be helped. For high-born nobles and royals, the societal debut proved they were now adults. So it is understandable that Clovis, who had served Alicia since she was ten and watched her grow up, would have mixed feelings about his mistress's coming-of-age ceremony.

But on that day, at that moment, when he'd seen her at the grand ball...

Something had changed within him.

Closing his eyes, that scene appeared in his mind as if burned into the back of his eyelids. Soft blue hair; a beautiful, clear, intelligent look; a dazzling smile with charmingly inviting lips. The lovely girl was now an adult woman, her dignified beauty a small bud unfurling into a large blooming rose.

Everyone's eyes had been on her, but she remained calm and composed. She truly was a royal princess, living up to her nickname, the Blue Rose of Heiland.

It was admirable, and he'd felt so proud.

So what was the pain that was squeezing his heart?

"...Hey, hello?"

"Wha—?"

Clovis involuntarily took a half-step back as Alicia peered into his face. His reaction made her pout as she crossed her arms disapprovingly.

"You're acting a little strange today, even when I called out to you."

"I apologize."

Alicia shrugged away the apology, then tilted her head. "Can you hear it? Someone's practicing on their instrument."

“...You’re right.”

Listening carefully, Clovis could make out faint music on the wind. It was hard to tell, but it sounded like a famous tune often played at balls.

Alicia giggled.

“Lady Fourier used to sing this song during our dance lessons.”

“Yes, she did.”

Clovis lowered his eyes at the memory.

He’d acted as Alicia’s partner during many of her dance lessons. The chief lady-in-waiting insisted the princess be ready to dance with anyone who asked and often appointed different castle staff to be her dance partners. In fact, they danced together again recently. So why did it feel like a distant memory?

Suddenly, Alicia’s gaze clouded over before she spoke hesitantly. “Erm, Clovis. I have a request.”

“What is it?”

The princess timidly opened her mouth. “Dance with me for one song.”

“Now?”

“We don’t have to if you don’t want to... But we didn’t get to dance during my birthday ball.”

“I am your adviser. No subject would dare ask their mistress to dance in those circumstances,” Clovis retorted with a wry smile.

“I know, but...” Alicia’s sky-blue eyes shook nervously. After a brief struggle, she made up her mind and looked straight at Clovis, her face slightly red. “It was my birthday, a special day, so if I could be a little selfish... If someone I really wanted to dance with had asked, I’m sure it would have been okay.”

Alicia’s expression was mature and beautiful, so unlike her ten-year-old self, that a small light sparked within Clovis.

It was a realization—an answer just waiting to be seen.

But the adviser turned away from that faint light because he knew if he acknowledged it, something big would change.

“Of course, my lady.”

And so he indulged his mistress, not as Clovis Cromwell, but as the princess’s loyal adviser.

“May I have this dance?”

“...Yes.”

But Alicia must have sensed his formality; her expression looked slightly lonely before she smiled helplessly and placed her hand in his.



HE held a precious treasure in his arms, but they were separated by a great chasm. Her hand was warm in his, but their feelings would run parallel, never having the chance to meet.

The faint melody of the waltz came to a graceful and quiet end. The mistress and her subject moved apart, bowing to each other as if they were at a real ball.

“You’ve really grown up,” Clovis said with a smile. “Really... So, so much.”

“And you’re still speaking to me like I’m a child?” Alicia pouted disapprovingly as she glared at Clovis.

“Of course not.”

And that’s the problem, because I can’t see you as a child anymore.

...It would take a while longer before he could face the small light growing within him.

Side Story: The Sutherland Name Lives On

“SEE, Al. I can read this book now.”

It was the mansion of House Sutherland, the most prosperous house in the kingdom. Riddhe, the young heir, sat on a scarlet sofa in the center of the salon as he leaned over a thick book. The target of his bragging was the family butler’s son, Albert.

Albert clapped, unfazed by Riddhe’s ceaseless need to boast.

“You’re amazing for reading that difficult book.”

“Humph. Of course, of course. I mean, I am Father’s son.” Riddhe held his nose high, his pride swelling by the minute. Then he rested his elbows on the table like a teacher and pointed at Albert. “Listen up, Albert. When King Estel founded Heiland, he was supported by five great houses. One of them was House Sutherland.”

“Oh. That’s amazing.”

“I know. Since then, the Sutherlands have been the kingdom’s shield, protecting its borders and presiding over politics as the king’s friend. Right now, Father is in charge of that role. In other words, Father is awesome!”

“Ooh, I see.”

“Oi, are you really listening?”

“Yes! Why would I not, young master?”

Albert lied hurriedly, hoping to cover the fact that he hadn’t been listening. After all, he’d already heard the same story dozens of times. It was natural that his responses had become automated.

“Hmph... Oh well. Anyway, I am Father’s son and heir to the Sutherland name, so it’s only natural I’m so talented.”

Albert frowned.

It was true that Riddhe was smart and hardworking, but he was still a child

who couldn't do a lot of things. Despite that, the adults showered Riddhe with unwarranted praise, hoping to please the head of House Sutherland. That was why he'd become so overconfident lately.

At this rate, Albert worried that Riddhe would lose sight of his true strength.

Just then, a deep, low voice called out.

"Is that so?"

"Master...!"

"Father!!"

Loid, Riddhe's father, entered the salon, cane in hand. Albert stood up straighter at the Duke of Sheraford's sudden appearance, and even Riddhe rose from his seat.

Loid was dignified and powerful, a political heavyweight in the kingdom. He stared at the children, and though Albert knew he wasn't the focus of the man's attention, he trembled in fear.

"Riddhe, did you just insinuate that you are superior?"

"Yes, Father. At least when it comes to other kids, I'm the best."

"Oh? Even better than Albert over here?"

His father's words seemed to annoy Riddhe.

"Of course! Al is—"

"Not part of the nobility, but are you really sure you can do everything better than he does?"

Riddhe swallowed. "I-I guess..." he stuttered after a pause.

Standing next to him, Albert got a bad feeling about what was to come.



AND his hunch was right.

From the next day on, aside from the time he spent having lessons with his tutors, Riddhe would follow Albert everywhere. To make matters worse, he desperately inserted himself into Albert's chores, such as cleaning, laundry, and

cooking—things he wouldn't ever need to do as a son of the duke.

“Young master! It's fine; I'll fold that!”

“Whoa! You can't touch that! You're gonna break it!”

“No! Not the knife! It's too dangerous!!”

It was disaster after disaster, so full of risky behavior that Albert couldn't bear to watch. Even so, Riddhe was stubborn. He looked disgruntled whenever Albert stopped him, but he never complained. Instead, he would watch Albert work, then try to copy his actions again.

After a few days, Albert was exhausted.

The incident happened that day.

“You can't, young master! You'll get hurt!”

“Who says...I can't?! I won't...lose out...to you!”

Albert was standing under a tall tree, looking more flustered than usual. It was to be expected because Riddhe was clinging to the tree branches and doing his best to climb upwards as Albert watched on in fear.

“What should I do? Oh, dear, why does it have to be tree climbing...?”

Albert groaned as he clutched at his head. Riddhe had apparently seen Albert climbing a tree with the kids around town and was determined to try it himself.

After much struggling, he reached a decent height. Sitting on a thick branch, he called out to Albert excitedly.

“Look, Al! I climbed all the way up here!”

“I can see! It's amazing, so please come down already!!”

“What? You're so boring. Oh? There's a nest up here; it's— Wahh?!”

As expected, Riddhe lost his balance while trying to look into the nest. To Albert's horror, his body swayed before falling from the branch.

“WAAAAAH?!”

“Young master!!”

Their screams echoed in unison throughout the forest as Albert dashed

forward. Suddenly, a man dressed in a long cloak blocked his path.

With an “Oof,” the man caught the falling Riddhe in his arms.

“I knew this would happen... Are you hurt, Riddhe?”

“M-M-M-Master...!!”

Albert almost fell to his knees as he recognized Loid.

The master had witnessed the terrible scene where the precious young master was seconds away from being grievously injured. Albert trembled with anxiety and fright, but Loid didn't seem angry.

“Don't worry. This isn't your fault,” the duke said to him while lowering Riddhe to the ground.

Riddhe himself was silent, probably still suffering from the shock of falling. Loid looked down at his son.

“So? Were you able to do everything better than him?”

Riddhe flinched and looked up at his father, lip trembling, then cast a guilty glance at Albert. “...No, Father. I couldn't do it. Albert could do things that I couldn't. I was wrong to say I could do everything better than him.” Riddhe paused for a moment. “But I'm the best at the things I can do! I can do those things better than anyone else!”

The duke just raised an eyebrow. “Is that right? Are you confident with that statement?”

“I...” Riddhe murmured, suddenly sounding less confident as he averted his eyes.

“Don't narrow your perspective, Riddhe. See for yourself what you can or cannot do. See what others are good at, and what they're not. That is the first step to learning from others.”

“Learn from others...?”

“Of course, you don't have to imitate everything.” Loid's expression softened, and Albert belatedly realized that the duke was smiling. He then reached out and mussed up Riddhe's red hair. “Your competitiveness is your strength. Keep

fighting. And you will surpass yourself. I look forward to the day when you'll surpass even me."

"Y-Yes!!"

Riddhe answered with vigor, cheeks flushed with emotion. Loid's eyes crinkled again before he turned away with a swish of his cloak.

Watching his father's back retreat into the forest, Riddhe shouted, "Father! I'll surely become a man worthy of the Sutherland name! And then, I'll—"



A luxurious study room with books neatly lined up along one wall. The desk was tidy as well, with a globe and wooden box next to an ink bottle and quill. Riddhe stood alone in the room that was waiting for a master who would never return home. Albert, watching him from the door, hesitated before calling out.

"Erm, master..."

"I can still feel Father's presence here, so I came to tell him."

Riddhe must have sensed Albert's confusion, for he continued without turning around. Princess Alicia and her adviser, Clovis, had dropped by to inform Riddhe of the future of House Sutherland and Riddhe himself.

"I remember what Father used to say. Get to know myself, and know others. Then, learn... This is where I'll start anew." Then a touch of anxiety slipped into his tone. "Albert. Will you continue to support me?"

It was such a modest request from the usually arrogant and confident Riddhe that Albert couldn't help but chuckle. Then he shrugged.

"Of course, I'll be here; unless you're kicking me out of House Sutherland?"

"...No."

Riddhe heaved a relieved sigh, then laughed as well. Then he finally turned to face Albert, that familiar smirk back on his face as he stood with hands on his hips.

"I need to go through this room. Help me out, Al."

"Of course! Please tell me what to do."

Albert thumped a fist on his chest with a smile as Riddhe snorted in amusement.

Afterword

THANK you very much for picking up Volume 2 of *Blue Rose Princess*. My name is Roku. I'm genuinely glad I could deliver this work into everyone's hands, and I am filled with gratitude that my readers have made this book possible.

Since this is the second afterword, I'd like to share a little behind-the-scenes story with everyone. First of all, Riddhe, the main focus of the first half of this book, is a character I'm particularly attached to. He's a character who has mostly been in the background since his introduction, but I've always wanted to give him a bigger role. However, I couldn't decide how to make him the protagonists' ally.

Then, when I was working on the idea for the Privy Council Arc, I suddenly thought, "How about this arc?"

The questions came immediately. What kind of person is he? Why is he so hostile towards Clovis? Why would he become their ally? I was obsessed with writing all about him. So it's not too much of a stretch to call the first half of this book "Revolutionary Reprise of Riddhe Sutherland." That's how much the story revolved around him.

Then, there's the second half of the book. Sorry to keep everyone waiting. And sorry for keeping myself waiting too. As I briefly touched on in Volume 1's afterword, one of the main themes of this story is the love between a mistress and her servant and how difficult it was to elaborate too much on such a relationship in the earlier parts.

But now that Alicia has grown up, their relationship is finally progressing. However, things are tense, no thanks to the various problems that keep coming up. As I wrote the story, I kept having the urge to yell, "Why are you two so exasperating?!"

But that's just what they're like. Looking back on it now, it's natural that they would share this kind of close bond.

And I can't forget to mention Hazuki Futaba, who is in charge of the illustrations for both volumes.

Readers who hadn't read the story on *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* must have been surprised to see the cover and sofa scenes. Both symbolize changes in the two protagonists' relationship, and I was personally looking forward to seeing Futaba-sensei's illustrations!

She illustrated both scenes beautifully, far surpassing my imagination, and I'm just so happy I want to jump with joy. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank her again. Thank you so much.

Lastly, the story is finally moving towards its climax.

What will happen between Alicia and Clovis and the Erdalian characters introduced in this book? Will Alicia save her kingdom and redo her life successfully? And how about those frustrating "unrequited" feelings...?

I'd love for you to continue following the story of the *Revolutionary Reprise of the Blue Rose Princess*.

April 2018 (Good Day)



The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess

By Makino Maebaru Illustration Hachi Uehara

What adventures await a priestess with the inconvenient power to rouse the baser instincts of others and the imperial prince who's unaffected by her?!



The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illustration Mitsuya Fuji

A young woman with overpowered magic gets sent back 6 years after being killed. She takes this second chance at life to get with her greatest enemy, the dragon emperor!



Reincarnated as the Last of My Kind

By Kiri Komori Illustration Yamigo

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



I Guess This DRAGON Who Lost Her EGG to Disaster Is My Mom Now

1
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